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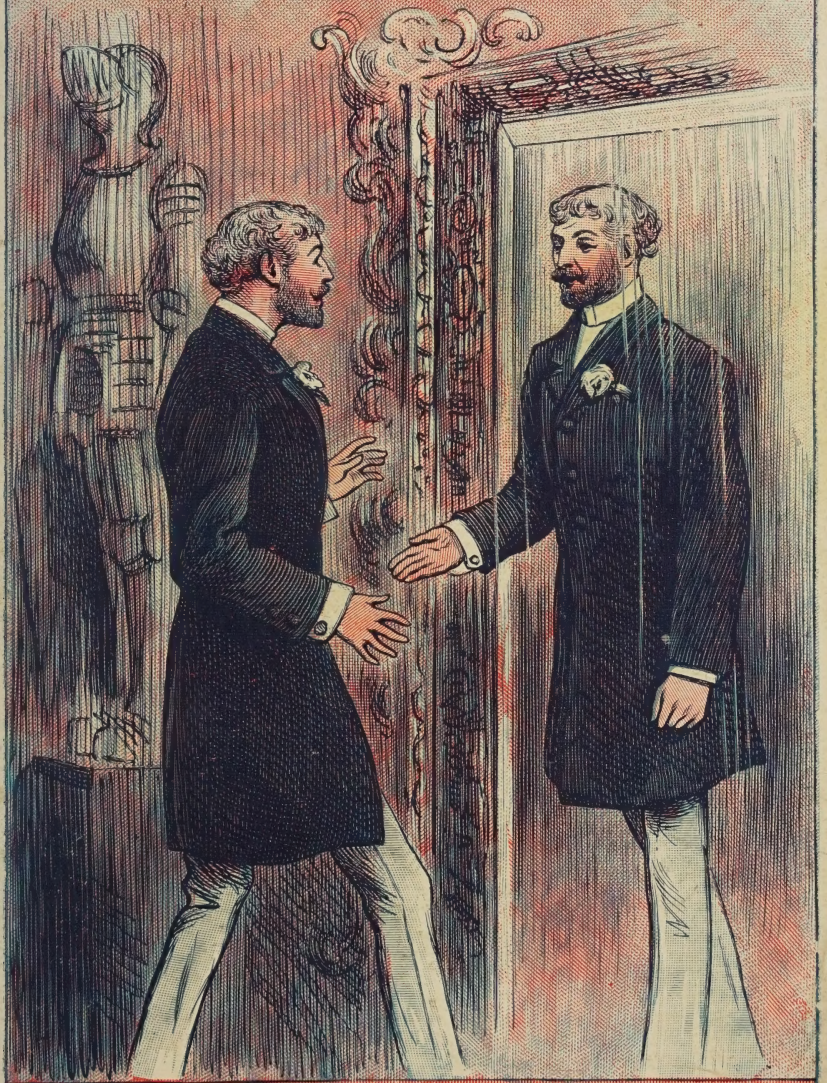
HIS OTHER SELF

BY E. J. GOODMAN



AUTHOR OF "TOO CURIOUS" &c.

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HIS OTHER SELF.

HIS OTHER SELF.

A STORY.

BY

EDWARD J. GOODMAN,

AUTHOR OF

"TOO CURIOUS," "PAID IN HIS OWN COIN," ETC.

"Γνῶθι σεαυτὸν."

LONDON:

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DEDICATED

TO

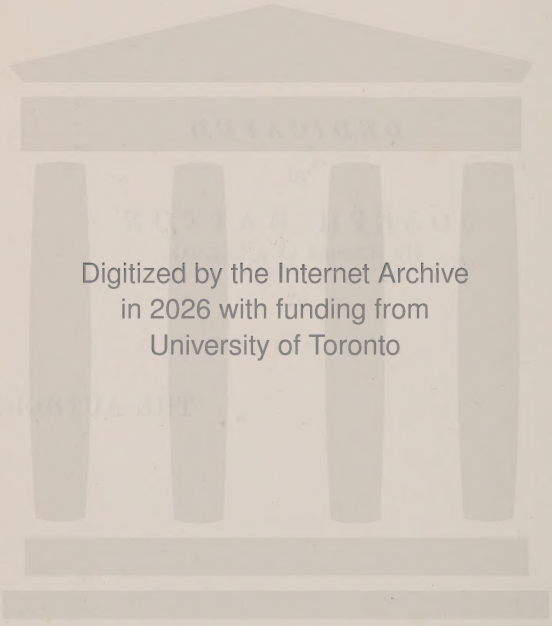
JOSEPH HATTON

(IN MEMORY OF A DREAM)

BY

HIS FRIEND,

THE AUTHOR.



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HIS OTHER SELF.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAGIC MIRROR.

"A MAGIC mirror? Nonsense!"

Thus scornfully spoke Mr Horace Hawtree, a gentleman of imposing presence and superior air, to his companion, Mr Samuel Titkins, a meek, deferential little man, with whom he was walking up the Strand one fine afternoon in autumn.

"Yes—yes—certainly," replied the latter. "Of course I don't for a moment— But that is what Max says."

"Pooh!" retorted Mr Hawtree. "Reuben Max would say anything to sell his rubbish."

"Very likely—that is to say, no doubt. But he really seems to believe in the supernatural qualities of this—er—"

"Believe in them? Don't tell me. Max believes in nothing but pounds, shillings and pence."

"Well—er—but don't you think he is just a little what you might call—superstitious, eh?"

"Rubbish! It is not superstition with him, but business. Max picks up a curio—goodness knows where—and sticks a legend upon it—and a price. I have known him do the same thing scores of times

before. A character for credulity is sometimes a very useful commodity. If people think you actually believe in anything—no matter how absurd—they will credit you with sincerity, and if you are sharp, you can trade upon your reputation. Now that is Reuben Max's case. Ah! he can't deceive me."

"To be sure, to be sure. You are so very—But, excuse me for saying it, I really think he is in earnest this time."

"H'm! How much does he ask for the thing?"

"Well, now, that is the oddest part of the whole—er— He refuses to sell it at any price."

Mr Hawtree burst out into a loud laugh.

"Aha! my dear Titkins, upon my word you are too innocent. Why, don't you see what Max's game is? He is simply holding on to this magical piece of furniture in order to excite a demand for it and get a bigger sum for it. Just like him."

"At any rate," said Mr Titkins, shifting his ground, "the mirror is a very beautiful bit of work. Its genuineness is really—yes, I think I may say, it is *really* undoubted. I could hardly have believed that so large a piece of glass could have been turned out so early in the sixteenth century. But there is the name of the maker, Antonio Vicelli, engraved on the back, with the date, 1552, and the place of manufacture, Murano, in the State of Venice."

Mr Hawtree listened to these statements with an air of lofty incredulity; then he asked,—

"And what is the cock-and-bull story that Max has to tell about this wonderful piece of glass?"

"Well, you see," replied Mr Titkins, "it is not exactly a story. He is vague on the subject—yes, I must say he is vague. He says that the mirror has the power of producing a certain effect on any person who may be the actual *bona fide* owner of it, provided that the owner is a person of a certain sort of character."

"Very likely. It may, for instance, make a vain person vainer than ever—looking-glasses often do."

"Oh, no! I assure you it is nothing of that sort—so, at least, Max says. He declares that the owner, gazing at his reflection in the mirror, under certain conditions, will find the whole course of his life changed from that moment, and—this he hints rather than states—in a very unpleasant way."

"What utter stuff!" exclaimed Mr Hawtree. "It is all a trick, I tell you, to run up the price of the article. I wonder you don't perceive that yourself."

"Of course, I quite agree with you, quite," replied Mr Titkins; "but I assure you the mirror is well worth seeing, it is really most—"

"Well, let us go and see it; but mark my words, it will be for sale before long."

The two friends had been strolling together from the city towards the west-end while holding the above conversation. Hawtree was a stockbroker, with a taste for collecting old pictures, furniture, china, and the like. He considered his own judgment infallible in such matters, and was declared by his friends—behind his back—to have the largest accumulation of shams and imitations in the metropolis. Titkins, on the other hand, was a collector of more modest pretensions, who always doubted his own judgment, and yet had managed to get together a collection of curios which, for rarity and genuineness, was, of its size, said to be almost unique.

In due course the two connoisseurs found themselves in Wardour Street, on the threshold of the shop and warehouse of Reuben Max, a noted dealer in *bric-à-brac* and articles of *virtu*.

Reuben Max, a German by birth, was an eccentric old fellow; a strange mixture of cunning and simplicity, of avarice and generosity, but bearing a high character for honesty in his dealings. He was one of the shrewdest men of business in the trade, yet

displayed an almost incredible credulity in all matters that appealed to human superstition. In vain might you attempt to deceive him with a sham antique of metal or ceramic ware: he could see through the fraud in a moment; but offer him something in the nature of a charm, an amulet or a talisman, and you got on his blind side. A well-accredited traveller from the East could palm off upon him almost anything in the shape of a magic crystal, an enchanted bit of amber, or a divining rod, and get a price for it, and if the legend attached to the rubbish were only strange and romantic enough to stagger all reasonable belief, the price was not unlikely to be a good one.

But in all things else you could trust honest old Max implicitly. No matter what you might purchase at his shop, you could be sure that it was genuine. He might ask and get more than it was worth, but, at any rate, it was what he represented it to be. To say that you bought such or such a piece of old china or furniture at Reuben Max's was to give it a hall-mark at once.

He had another peculiarity. Although a keen hand at a bargain, whether in buying or selling, yet, business apart, he could be liberal, and even generous. If you were poor, and he happened to take a fancy to you, he might beat you down to the last penny, and, after the transaction was concluded, would lend you money without interest if you wanted it.

Reuben Max's place of business was a shabby, old-fashioned shop, the grimy windows of which revealed nothing of the treasures within. At the rear of it was a long warehouse, and both were stocked, as well as the rooms on the upper floors, with all manner of curious and beautiful objects, some remarkable only for their oddity or rarity; others fine and precious works of *faiënce* and *virtu*. Here vases from China and Japan stood shoulder to shoulder with pottery of Sèvres and Palissy ware; old arms

and armour, exquisitely inlaid with *niello*, adorned the walls beside hangings of antique tapestry and richly-embroidered silks and velvets. Upon shelves and brackets rested dainty jewelled and enamelled snuff-boxes, painted fans, elaborate carvings in ivory, and ornaments in hammered iron, copper and bronze, while all over the premises was scattered furniture of every age and shape, from a curule chair of marble, dug up in the Roman forum, to a gilded Louis Quatorze couch, rescued or stolen in the sack of the Tuileries.

The old dealer was not in his shop when the two visitors entered. He was holding a small *levée* in the long store-room in the back part of the same floor, where he kept his choicest treasures. The fame of the so-called magic mirror had spread abroad, and at all hours of the day old customers came flocking in to view the marvel.

Hawtree and Titkins found a group of such visitors standing in genuine admiration before the miraculous looking-glass, upon the beauties and wonders of which Reuben Max had been descanting.

In person the dealer was a singular and picturesque object. A tall man with a stoop, he appeared shorter than he really was, and his keen dark eyes, his long grizzled hair and beard, his sharp aquiline nose, and thin bony hands, together with his spare, gaunt figure clad in a faded robe of velvet, adorned with tarnished gold embroidery of quaint design, imparted to him the semblance of some uncanny old wizard.

The mirror, at which he was pointing with his long, skinny finger, was undoubtedly a very handsome one. It consisted of a perfect sheet of bevelled glass, so large as to reflect the whole of any human figure standing before it, and was set in a metal frame of exquisite workmanship, embellished with arabesques and strange mystic symbols. It rested on an easel at the further end of the apartment, with a dusty window a few feet behind it, so that the visitor

might, if he pleased, be able to examine it from every point of view.

"Well, Max," one of his customers was saying, "so you will not put a price on it, eh?"

"No, my dear, no," replied the old man. "I vill not sell him, not for any brice at all—not for de bresent. You shall look at him, and be velcome, so long as you shall blease. But sell him—no—no—not for de bresent."

"So this is the magic mirror, is it?" said Mr Hawtree, in a sneering tone, which instantly brought a frown to the old dealer's brow. "It is very good of you to show it for nothing, Max. I wonder you don't charge a shilling a head for the sight. And what are its magical properties, eh?"

"You shall see *yourself* in it!" exclaimed Reuben Max, with fierce energy; "your own very self, if you shall be de drue owner of it, and if you are de man for it. But, ach! I do not know. I have not yet found de man for it—not yet, but I shall find him yet; berhaps I shall."

"Most people see themselves in looking-glasses, Max," said Hawtree; "there is no great novelty in that."

"Dat is not vat I mean," cried the dealer, with a dry chuckle; "de man vat shall see himself as he may be seen in dat mirror shall see enough—more dan he vants, by Gott!"

"Is it some hideous, appalling object that shall frighten him out of his wits?" asked Hawtree.

"No," replied Mr Max. "Only himself—his very—very self."

"So you said before, my friend," observed Hawtree, "and we don't seem to get any further. I think you will have to be a little more explicit if you want to sell this pretty bit of glass."

"But I don't vant to sell him, I tell you," retorted the dealer," I shall keep him till I find de man for him—yes, till den."

"Well, Max, then I hope you will find the man. But I pity the poor devil when you do."

"Dat you may, Mr Hawtree, indeed," replied Mr Max. "I vould not be, vat you say, in his boots."

Thereupon Mr Hawtree, shrugging his shoulders, turned on his heel, and, accompanied by his friend Titkins, proceeded to saunter through the long room and examine the various works of art therein displayed.

"What an old humbug it is!" he exclaimed. "The glass is a good one, no doubt, and does not need this bit of quackery to make it go off."

"It would be a little curious, though, don't you think," suggested Mr Titkins timidly, "to know what comes of it, supposing—of course I only say—supposing—eh?"

"Supposing Max catches a flat?" cried his friend. "Nothing more probable. There is no limit to human credulity; but I should say that what is more likely to come of such a transaction as Max evidently contemplates, is the parting of a fool and a good deal of his money."

Meanwhile, the remainder of Reuben Max's visitors stood gazing, a little awe-stricken, at the magic mirror, as though expecting that it would sooner or later manifest some wonderful phenomenon.

"If," remarked one, a Mr Price, "the glass produces upon its owner the unpleasant effect you refer to, are you not a little afraid to look into it yourself?"

"No, no," replied the dealer eagerly. "It shall not hurt me—not at all—I am not de man for it."

"Do I understand, then, that you are unable to see yourself in it?"

"Yes. I see myself in it, as I see myself everyveres—alvays. But not in dat vay—never at all, blease Gott!"

The old man, as he spoke, gave a shudder, and averted his eyes from the mirror, as though in

dread of the very horror which he professed to defy.

"Well then, Mr Max," observed the visitor, as he turned to depart, "all I can say is that I don't understand it."

"Ach! Mr Brice," said the dealer solemnly, placing a finger on his arm, "dere is many dings dat ve all shall not understand—neider you nor I. Dere are mysteries of dis vorld and of oder vorlds vich man shall see and shall not gombrehend. Ach! it is so."

At this moment the old man's demeanour suddenly changed. The superstitious believer in magic instantly became transformed into the acute man of business. For his keen eye caught sight of one of his customers, a new comer, handling a beautiful and delicate Sèvres vase at the farther end of the apartment, and he saw the prospect of a sale.

The new visitor was Mr George Gilchrist, a tall, dark man of grave and even melancholy aspect, and it was evident that he was eying the precious object which he had picked up with no great curiosity.

Nevertheless the dealer, having shuffled up to his side, exclaimed,—

"Ach! my dear; dat is a beaudiful bot—real *bleu du roi*—and very rare. But you shall have him a bargain, you shall, indeed."

"I am sorry to say," replied Mr Gilchrist, with a sigh, as he replaced the vase carefully on the table, "that I have not come here to pick up bargains. I fear I shall never be able to do so again. It is all the other way with me this time, Mr Max."

"Vat! You vant to sell, eh?" cried the old man keenly.

"Hush!" replied the other; "I will speak to you presently, when you are less engaged."

"All right, my dear," said Mr Max, "vait till I shall get rid of dese beoples."

Returning to the group before the mirror, Mr Max

seemed pensive and less inclined for conversation than before. By degrees his visitors dropped off, but there were still two or three left when the party was joined by a new arrival.

Reuben Max recognised him at a glance.

"Mr Albert Vane," he said to himself. "Ya; Mr Albert Vane. Ach! I vonder is he de man for de mirror? Ve shall see."

CHAPTER II.

MR MAX'S CUSTOMERS.

A HANDSOME young man, perfectly well dressed, was Mr Albert Vane. Nothing could be more prepossessing than his demeanour and appearance. There was an air of courtesy and amiability in his engaging countenance, which at once inspired confidence, while there was an easy grace in his movements that instantly commanded admiration. Altogether, Albert Vane must have been pronounced to be a very pleasant person to look at, and seemed to be an equally agreeable person to know.

He entered the dealer's store-room with a light, leisurely step, lifting his glossy hat by way of salute to the company present, and carelessly surveying the various beautiful objects around him.

George Gilchrist, happening to be standing at that moment not far from the door, was the first to accost him, and Mr Vane took his hand, giving it a cordial pressure, accompanied by a friendly smile.

"I suppose you have come to see the magic mirror, like the rest?" suggested the new visitor.

"Well no," replied Gilchrist, "I have seen it before." Then he added, in a lower tone, "Vane, just one moment. I am here for a very different purpose. I am desperately in want of money. I cannot tell you what a painful position I am in; you shall know all later. Driven to my last resource, I am about to offer to sell Max a portion of my furniture, old relics which have been in my family for three generations. It will be a cruel wrench to part with it, but I have no other choice, unless some kind friend steps in to help me. You are rich, and, I am sure, generous. Will you lend me a couple of hundred pounds—I will give you ample security—to save me from this painful necessity?"

As Gilchrist spoke, the smile faded from Albert Vane's lips. He looked grave and sympathetic, also slightly embarrassed; and the tone in which he answered his friend's appeal was that of one performing a painful task.

"My dear Gilchrist," he said, "I am truly sorry to hear you are in such trouble, I am indeed; and if I could be of any service to you, I would do anything in my power to help you. But, my dear fellow, you do not know my position, and I cannot very well explain it now. I have many claims upon me of all sorts, and there are other circumstances, which I cannot go into, that must render it quite impossible for me to lend you such a sum as you require, or anything like it. You cannot imagine what pain it causes me to tell you this, but it is positively the fact. If I could assist you in any other way, I would be most happy to do so; but with money, my dear boy, it is impossible—quite impossible."

There was something so earnest, so sincerely regretful in Albert Vane's manner as he spoke these words, that Gilchrist felt there was no more to be said.

"You are a good fellow, Vane," he remarked, once more pressing his hand. "I know you would help

me if you could. Pardon me for having troubled you. I suppose I must carry out the purpose for which I came here."

With another sympathetic glance, and a gentle sigh, Albert Vane then turned away from his friend to join the two or three visitors who still remained with Reuben Max.

"I hope I see you vell, sir?" said the old dealer, taking, with a slightly timid air, the neatly-gloved hand which Albert Vane offered to him. "Shentlemen," he added, turning to the small group before him, not particularly profitable customers, by the way, "I am sure you vill excuse me, berhaps Mr Vane has come on business."

"You are right, Mr Max," replied Albert Vane, "but pray do not let me take you away, I am in no hurry."

The visitors took the hint and their leave. And soon the only persons remaining in that part of the room were Mr Max himself and Albert Vane, while Gilchrist still lingered at the other end of the long apartment, affecting to examine with interest the curiosities it contained, and waiting for his desired inter view with the dealer.

"Now, Mr Vane," said old Reuben with a keen look in his glittering eyes, and gently rubbing his hands together with eager expectancy, "vat can I do for you? It is alvays a bleasure to deal mid such a nice gentleman as you; you have such good daste and such blenty of moneys—eh?"

"Hush, Max," whispered Vane, with an uneasy glance towards Gilchrist. "I would like to have a word with you in private. You really must let me have that Venetian mirror. I want it for a special purpose. I know that it is always best to be frank with you, and that you will not take advantage of what I tell you. Now, like a good fellow, name the lowest price you will accept for the glass."

Reuben Max eyed his visitor attentively for a moment before replying; then he said,—

"Shall I name a brice for de mirror? Ach! if I could, how happy I should be! And so you vant him, eh? Vat! to see yourself?"

"Well, Max," laughed Vane, "for that of course, though I am not much to look at."

"Ach! Mr Vane," exclaimed the dealer, lifting his hands, "you say so, but nobody else."

"But it is not only for this that I want it. You know my house?"

"Ach! vat a beaudiful house! Such a daste, such—"

"Yes, yes. But the prettiest place, you know, Max, may be spoilt by a bad outlook. Now my house has a very pleasant frontage, facing one of the best kept squares in London. But at the back it is simply dreadful. Unfortunately I overlook a horrid slum, and the sight of that is not pleasant, is it?"

"No, no, it is not. Slums is not nice."

"Well, the view from my back windows offers nothing but the spectacle of this dirty court, which, as you say, is not nice. I have managed to shut out the sight of it in several rooms by putting up painted glass and other arrangements; but I can get nothing to please me for my study. Now that looking-glass of yours would just fit into the window. It would be thoroughly in harmony with the decorations of the room—the metal frame would go well with the old arms and armour on the wall, and while it would leave plenty of space above to light the apartment, it would shut out the sight of all those poor, wretched people and their miserable alley."

"Yes, yes," observed Mr Max reflectively. "The sight of boor beoples is not nice."

"It is not only that," said Vane, "it is most painful. If there is one thing that distresses me more than

another, it is to see poverty and suffering which I cannot relieve."

"But you can relieve it," pleaded the dealer. "You are very rich."

"Come, come, Max," replied Vane; "pardon me, but you are not talking with your usual good sense. How can I attempt to lighten the awful load of suffering that oppresses this great city? I assure you it sometimes afflicts me beyond expression to think of the misery and want around me on every side, while I stand powerless to alleviate it. For what can one do? To touch the mere fringe of all this terrible suffering would be simply to impoverish oneself. Were I to expend even the whole of my resources, such as they are, for the benefit of these poor creatures, it would go but a little way towards diminishing the vast sum of human misery, while it would leave me penniless. One cannot do everything."

"So: derefore, it is best to do noding."

"I do not say that," said Vane, colouring slightly. "I do all I can, and of course it is not for me to say what I do. However, my dear Max, that is not the question just now. The point is, will you let me have that Venetian mirror at a fair price?"

"To shut out de sight of de boor beoples," observed the dealer, in a meditative tone. Then he was silent for a moment, and said to himself, "H'm, I vonder if he is de man for de mirror? But he says he does someding for de boor beoples, so I am not sure."

"Well," asked Vane, "what do you say? I really don't mind paying a reasonable sum."

"Ach!" replied Mr Max, "I must dink of it—I must dink of it. Dere is no von I vould rather sell de mirror to dan you, Mr Vane—but—I must dink of it."

Albert Vane was annoyed; but he did not show his annoyance; he never did. He perceived that the old man was not yet in a humour to part with his

precious treasure, and thought it best to let the subject drop for the present. Besides, George Gilchrist was still hovering about the place, and he did not wish that the man whom he had just declined to assist in his dire need, should hear him bargaining for a valuable work of art.

"Very well," he said, "be it so, Max. Think the matter over, as you say, and as soon as convenient let me know your decision."

"I vill, sir, I vill," replied Mr Max, glad to be relieved from an embarrassing position; "but if in de meanvhile dere is anything else"—indicating with a wave of the hand the many precious objects within sight.

"I will take a look round, if you will allow me," said Vane. "Don't mind me. I know Mr Gilchrist is waiting to see you. I am afraid I have kept you from him too long."

Thus released from attendance on one of his best customers, Mr Max turned his attention to George Gilchrist, who was indeed awaiting him somewhat impatiently.

"You shall excuse me, Mr Gilchrist," said the dealer, when he had joined that gentleman, "but I had some business—"

"Don't apologise, Mr Max," replied Gilchrist, "I will come to the point at once. You know I have been a pretty good customer to you; perhaps, for my own interest, better than I ought to have been."

"So you have, Mr Gilchrist; very good indeed."

"Just so, Mr Max. Now I want you to be a customer to me."

"Ach! how happy I should be!"

"No doubt. Well, now you have the opportunity. I am greatly in want of money, and as you are an old friend, I will tell you in a word how it has come about. I became some time ago responsible for the

debts of a relative; backed a heavy bill for him, little expecting what has now happened, that I should have to meet it. In addition to this, a great misfortune has fallen on my family. A young man nearly related to me has got into serious trouble, and if I do not help him by advancing a certain sum of money, the result to him will be disgrace and ruin."

"I am very sorry to hear it, Mr Gilchrist," said the dealer, "very sorry."

"I am sure you would be. Now you can help me if you will."

"Ach! my dear, I really have got no—"

"I am not going to ask you for a loan," interrupted Gilchrist; "I have come to you on a simple matter of business. I have come to ask you to buy my Chippendale furniture."

"Your Shippendale vurniture, Mr Gilchrist?" exclaimed Mr Max, taken aback by the suddenness of the proposal, but delighted to hear it.

"Yes," Gilchrist continued; "you know it is valuable. There is, perhaps, no more perfect set of its kind in the kingdom. You have seen it, and can judge for yourself."

"Ay, ay," replied the dealer, who by this time had recovered his self-possession, and all his old instincts as a bargainer. "It is good, very good. But, ach! my dear, Shippendales is not vat dey vas. Dere is too much of dem. Dey are vat you call a drug in de market."

"Nonsense," said Gilchrist, "you know better than that. You know that my set are worth three hundred pounds at least."

"Ach, Gott in Himmel!" cried Mr Max, "dree hundred bounds? No, no, Mr Gilchrist, dat is not so, and if it vas, vere am I to get dree hundred bounds? Oh, how I vish I could help you! But it can't be done, my dear, it can't be done."

"Well, Mr Max," said his customer, "then make

me an offer. For God's sake, do the best you can for me."

"So I vould, so I vould, if I could, Mr Gilchrist, but your Shippendales are not vorth so much as you dink, not nearly so much. Dere is any quantity of dem in de market just now going sheap, quite dirt sheap. Shippendales is not vat dey vas!"

"Well, tell me then what you think you could reasonably give?"

"Ach! my dear, I vould give you as much as I can. Let me see—let me see—say vivty bounds?"

"Fifty pounds! Good heavens! Mr Max, you do not mean that?"

The conversation continued in this strain for some time. The old dealer would make no further offer, but, adopting his usual practice in such cases, promised to "think it over," and make a higher bid if circumstances would permit.

"Berhaps I shall vind a customer for de Shippendales," he said. "You shall leave it to me—not so?"

"Well," replied Gilchrist, "I suppose I must let the matter stand in that way; but, remember, Mr Max, I am in most urgent need of the money."

"Very good, my dear," said the dealer, "ve vill see vat can be done, and I vill do de best I can for you."

Forced to accept this assurance, though bitterly disappointed, George Gilchrist then left the house.

"Dat vill do to begin mid," mused Mr Max. "Ach! I shall make a good bargain. Dose Shippendales is first-rate; de best I ever see. I vill give him von hondred buunds, berhaps von hundred and vivty, but not yet—not yet."

Meanwhile, Albert Vane had been wandering about the apartment inspecting its various and precious treasures, and casting many a covetous glance upon that rare and radiant mirror which he so eagerly desired to possess, and which the dealer was so reluctant to part with. The conversation between

Max and Gilchrist had at first been conducted in a low tone, but little by little the voices of the negotiators rose, so that by the time they had concluded and parted company, Vane had become fully aware of all that had passed between them.

He, of course, made no reference to the subject when the dealer rejoined him, with many apologies for having kept him waiting.

"Say nothing about it, my dear Max," he remarked. "I assure you I have amused myself very well with looking at all these pretty things, and I think I may relieve you of some of your charming property. What will you take for this, for instance?"

He had in his hand some choice specimen of porcelain, and in a few minutes made a bargain with the old dealer for this and a few other articles.

"I am sorry," he said, "you will not let me have the mirror. But I am sure you will alter your mind before long, if only to oblige me."

"Ach! Mr Vane, if I can, how bleased I shall be!" exclaimed the dealer. "But I must dink of it—I must dink of it."

Then Albert Vane took his departure, and stepped into the neat brougham which was awaiting him at the door.

Reuben Max, left alone for the first time that afternoon, seated himself in front of the much-coveted and mysterious mirror, and indulged in reflection in more than one sense.

"Shall I let him have it?" he mused. "Is he de man for it? I dink so; but I am not sure—not quite sure. Of all de men I know, I believe he is de most selfish, de most heartless; but is he bad enough for de mirror to vork its charm? I vould like to dry it on him; but I am not sure—not quite sure. Den, Mr Gilchrist! Yes, his Shippendales is unique, and I must have dem; but at my own brice. I vill go as var as von hundred and vivty bounds, if I must.

Dey are vorth double dat, as he says, and it vill be a good bargain. Boor vellow! I bity him; he is a good man. He has ruined himself to help oder beoples, and I vill help him myself—by Gott, I vill! But I must have my bargain virst—I must have my bargain."

CHAPTER III.

THE CHIPPENDALES.

Of its kind there was no more elegant or comfortable equipage in London than Albert Vane's brougham. Made by the best coachbuilder in Long Acre, on a special design, it was simply perfect in every respect. Neat and unpretending in external appearance, it could have attracted little or no attention. It was only when a friend had the privilege of driving with its owner that its merits could be discovered. How softly it bowled along on its well-made springs and its indiarubber-bound wheels! How luxuriously one reclined among its padded seats! With what careful forethought every appliance had been provided that could minister to the convenience of the traveller! Here was a moveable ledge to support a book or a modest lunch; there was a small mirror; elsewhere a lamp; in another corner a receptacle for matches. A tiny clock, conveniently placed, obviated the necessity of consulting one's watch; a speaking tube enabled the occupant to communicate easily with the driver, while, by a simple contrivance, the front and back seats could in a moment be converted into a comfortable couch. Albert Vane's chariot, in short, was a sort of gentleman's boudoir on wheels.

Needless were it to say that his coachman was the most skilful of drivers; equally unnecessary is it to add that his horse was the best that money could buy.

"Home!" cried Albert Vane to his coachman, as with light step he tripped into his carriage; then sinking down among the cushions of its luxurious back seat, he folded his arms, stretched forward his legs, and reflected.

"It is very annoying that Max will not let me have that mirror. He could see that I wanted it badly. Perhaps that is the reason why he holds back. I suppose he will ask at last some monstrous price for it. Oh! how detestable are these money-making, money-grasping tradesmen! They think of nothing but gain—gain—gain! Thank heaven, I have no such vice! I am perfectly content with what I possess, and would part with anything in the world that I do not want myself. Why should he not do the same? I have been a good customer to him, and I think he might have obliged me in this matter. The fellow is ungrateful as well as greedy. As for his story about the glass having magical properties, that of course is ridiculous. Yet surely he knows that I, of all men, cannot be imposed upon by such nonsense. A magic mirror, indeed! Fancy such a thing in the nineteenth century, or any century, for the matter of that! But, magic or no magic, I must have that mirror. I suppose I shall have to exercise a little diplomacy with our friend to bring him to reason; but that will be troublesome, and I hate trouble. Yet sooner or later I must get that glass. I never yet failed to obtain anything I really wanted, and I do not mean to fail in this instance. Still it is annoying—very annoying indeed."

Then Albert Vane, to soothe his disappointment, drew forth a cigarette, lighted it, and smoked.

Presently his thoughts took another turn. "Poor Gilchrist! I was sorry to refuse him; but one must

not begin this sort of thing. Loans are dangerous. The man who lends another a sum of money is an angel; he who asks for it back again is a monster. A creditor is the most hateful of creatures, therefore be not a creditor. Yet I should like to give the poor fellow a lift. He is evidently in awful trouble, and all through his own folly in wasting his substance on poor and ungrateful relations. Self-sacrifice of this sort is very heroic, no doubt, but I have no sympathy with such quixotism. Why should a man help his friends at the cost of his own ruin? It is the greatest mistake in the world However, Gilchrist has chosen to do it, and of course it is no affair of mine. And now he is forced to sell his best furniture—the choicest set of Chippendales that I know of. I wish I had had old Max's chance; as it is, I suppose he will wait till Gilchrist is driven to desperation, and then make him a fair, or fairer bid. Upon my word, I have a good mind to anticipate him. Why should I not? I happened to overhear their conversation, and know how matters stand between them. Ought I to take advantage of it? Some might think such a proceeding a little shabby; but why trouble oneself with questions of ethics in a matter of business of this sort? Besides, it would be a good way of helping poor Gilchrist out of his fix, and I would like to have those Chips. Yes, I will do it too. Old Max will be furious; but I can't help that. He looks out for himself; why shouldn't I do the same?"

The next moment Albert Vane had seized the speaking tube communicating with his coachman, and ordered him to change his course.

"Drive," he said, "to Mr Gilchrist's, Cheyne Terrace, Chelsea."

By this time the brougham was well on its way to Albert Vane's residence at Bayswater, but a short cut across the park soon brought him to his new destination.

George Gilchrist occupied a fine old Queen Anne house in that pleasant quarter of the town which still, happily, to some extent, keeps up its old repute. Chelsea, doubtless, is not what it was, but to this day it is the haunt of artists and *dilletante*, and long may it remain sacred from the hands of the "improver."

Gilchrist had, in the days of his prosperity, fitted up his quaint old residence with fine taste. Perhaps he had spent more money than he should have done on "pots" and *bric-à-brac;* but at least he lavished only a part of his substance on such vanities. If he was extravagant, he was also generous. For years he had been the main support of a host of poor relations, and, at last, he had been led into serious, even desperate, difficulties by his good nature. Piece by piece he had parted with all the choicest of his art treasures, and now nothing valuable remained to him on which he could raise a substantial sum of money except that precious set of Chippendale furniture. He was a very unbusiness-like man, and had little knowledge of the expedients by which persons in need of pecuniary assistance usually obtain it. A respectable solicitor would, no doubt, have been able to help him to tide over his worst difficulties, but he never thought of applying to one.

As Albert Vane entered his friend's house, he could not but be painfully struck by the denuded appearance of its interior. The hall was stripped of the tapestry and blue china which once adorned its walls, and there were ugly blank spaces on the side of the staircase, where formerly hung choice engravings, medallions, and other works of art. The much coveted Chippendales furnished one of the lower rooms, and an open door afforded the visitor a glimpse of these quaint, old-fashioned chairs, tables, cabinets, and so forth. Fabricated of fine seasoned mahogany, and exquisitely adorned with those architectural mouldings for which their maker's work was so famous, pre-

served with such loving care that age had improved rather than impaired their condition, they excited in Albert Vane's eyes an admiration which he had never felt before, for he already regarded them as practically his own.

He was conducted to George Gilchrist's study, and at a glance he could perceive that it was as sadly stripped of its former adornments as were other parts of the house. The walls, that used to be hung with rare etchings, choice specimens of the French and Flemish schools of painting, for which Gilchrist had a special affection, fine plaques and bits of old "blue," were now almost bare. Gilchrist, after a few words of greeting, bitterly alluded to his altered circumstances.

"You are in a poor man's house now," he said. "Look round these walls. Every article of value which once covered them, except those you see, is either sold or pawned."

"My dear Gilchrist," said Vane, "I am truly sorry for your troubles. I told you so not long ago, and I meant it. I regretted, I regret still, that I could not do what you asked of me, but it has since occurred to me whether I might not be able to be of service to you in another way."

Gilchrist's gloomy face brightened a little at these words, though he was wholly at a loss to understand what his visitor meant. So he merely remarked,—

"It is very good of you, Vane."

"Not at all, my dear fellow. I will explain myself at once. You remember you told me that you felt compelled to part with some of your furniture, and I have reason to know that you referred to your beautiful Chippendales."

"Yes," said Gilchrist, with a sigh, "but how do you know that?"

"Well, the fact is," replied Vane, with some little embarrassment, "I heard you talking about it to old Max."

"You listened to our conversation?" asked Gilchrist, with a slight frown.

"I could hardly help doing so. You were speaking in a louder tone than you thought, and, as a matter of fact, I heard the substance of what you said."

"Then you know of the beggarly offer which that old miser made me?"

"I do. He proposed to allow you fifty pounds."

"Yes, but he gave me to understand that he might do better than that."

"Perhaps so, but surely you know Max by this time. He will probably keep on haggling with you for weeks, and perhaps only give you a very inadequate price after all. And it seems you are in immediate need of the money."

"God knows I am."

"Very well then, why not treat with some one else?"

"I don't think I ought to take the matter out of Max's hands just yet."

"Why not?"

"I accepted his proposal to think it over."

"What of that? You want the money urgently. Now look here, Gilchrist, I wish to do the best I can for you, I do indeed, and what I have to propose is this. Throw over old Max and deal with me. Tell me what you will take for the Chips, and I will meet you if I possibly can."

"Do you mean that you wish to buy them?"

"Certainly I do, as you seem willing to sell them."

"And yet but a short time ago you declared yourself unable to advance me the sum I asked you to lend me."

"That is a different thing. I tell you frankly that I am not prepared to offer you a loan. Do not ask me why. My reasons are in no way personal to yourself. I object to lend money on principle. But I will help a friend if I can, and so I have said I am willing

to help you in this matter. Now tell me, what do you want for this furniture?"

Gilchrist did not reply immediately. He was evidently perplexed, and hesitated to accept Vane's proposal.

"I don't like to break faith with Max," he said.

"There is no breach of faith in the matter that I can see," answered Vane. "Obviously, your promise to him was contingent on your being unable to do better elsewhere. If he lost his opportunity it is his own fault. Besides, your own interests ought to be your first consideration."

"They have never been so hitherto," said Gilchrist, with a sigh.

"So much the worse for you. Had it been otherwise, you would not have found yourself in your present scrape. To refuse my offer because you are waiting for that mercenary old tradesmen to deal fairly with you would be the sheerest quixotism; while, from what you told Max, I assume that the delay in getting the money would be of serious consequence to your family."

"What you say is very true, Vane, and I suppose I must yield to your arguments. But, pray, give the matter a moment's further consideration. It is like tearing my heart out to dispose of these family relics. I have kept them to the very last, hoping that I might not be compelled to sacrifice them. Once more, cannot I persuade you to let me have the money as a loan?"

It required all Vane's resolution to resist this appeal, and for the moment he felt strongly tempted to yield to it. But he eagerly coveted those unique Chippendales, and he felt that such a chance as he now had of securing them might never occur again.

"I really would oblige you if I could," he said; "but for the reason I have mentioned I cannot lend you the money. I will buy your furniture outright

if you like, but I cannot have anything to do with it on any other terms. Tell me, then, what you will take for it, and I will give you a cheque at once."

"The sum I require is, as I told you, two hundred pounds, but the property is worth a good deal more than that."

"Well, you shall have the two hundred pounds—or I would go as far as two hundred and fifty. Come now, decide. You will not do better."

Again Gilchrist paused, but at last he nerved himself to make the sacrifice thus forced upon him.

"Well then," he said, "I must accept your proposal. I cannot bargain or haggle about such things. You see my position—I am helpless."

Vane made no remark upon this last observation, and regarding the matter as settled, seated himself and wrote out a cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds. This he handed to Gilchrist, who had in the meanwhile prepared a formal receipt, which, after glancing at it, Vane carefully folded and placed in his pocket-book.

The transaction was now complete, yet still the purchaser hesitated.

"By the way, Gilchrist," he said, "of course there will be no necessity to tell Max that it was I who bought your furniture."

"I shall not go out of my way to tell him," replied Gilchrist; "but you cannot expect me to conceal the fact if I am questioned on the subject."

"No, no, certainly not," said Vane; but he was evidently not quite satisfied with his friend's reply.

The two men then shook hands, and Vane took his departure.

"I suppose," he reflected, "old Max will come to hear of this business sooner or later. Well, I can't help it if he does. But I wonder what he will say to my cutting him out in this way? He will not like it."

CHAPTER IV.

ALBERT VANE AT HOME.

Reuben Max did injustice to the character of Albert Vane. Selfish he was, no doubt, but not heartless. He had generous impulses, but he repressed them. They lay hidden, as it were, in the depths of his nature, and whenever they came to the surface he drove them back. Some men strive to correct a fault. Vane strove to correct a virtue. He knew that he was good-natured, and he knew that good-nature was dangerous. So he kept his generosity severely in check. A habit of this sort can be cultivated like any other, and habit, as we all know, is second nature.

And, after all, there was great excuse for him. He was a spoilt child of fortune. At an early age he had inherited a large income from a wealthy father, of whom he was the eldest and favourite son, and who had died intestate. He had been brought up in luxury; indulged in every desire, every whim, and granted an amount of liberty, and an abundance of means which might have led any ordinary youth into ruinous excesses.

But Albert Vane was no ordinary youth. His disposition comprised two opposite and conflicting qualities, impulsiveness and prudence. They are not unfrequently found in the same temperament, and, as a rule, one or the other overcomes its rival. In the case of Albert Vane, it was the latter that prevailed. He possessed a keen love of pleasure, but he had also great power of self-restraint, and at a very early period of his career formed a philosophy of his own. He discovered that the great end and aim of life was happiness, comfort, and enjoyment, and that these advantages could not be thoroughly secured

without the exercise of strict moderation. This is a very elementary truth, no doubt, but somehow it takes most men a lifetime to learn it. As it happened, Albert Vane learnt it in his youth and, what is more, acted up to it.

Having every means of self-gratification, he determined to gratify himself by every means at his command. With that view he laid down for his own guidance certain rules of life from which he rarely, if ever, departed. He resolved to indulge in no excess; to keep his health and his temper; to avoid all care and trouble, but to bear them if they came; to indulge his tastes, without extravagance; to spare no expense that he could afford, but to contrive that every outlay should bring him its equivalent. In short, it was his whole ambition to live an easy, careless, comfortable, but well-regulated existence.

He was not insensible to the woes of others. Far from it. They really distressed him. But he disliked pain so greatly, and the contemplation of it so disturbed his serenity, that he systematically closed his eyes to it. His desire to obtain that Venetian mirror to hide the misery that moved him so deeply, was characteristic of this trait in his disposition. It was his invariable practice, when any disagreeable or painful spectacle met his sight, to shut it out or turn his back upon it.

Adversity, perhaps, would have made a different man of him, but he was very prosperous indeed, and could not realise the misfortunes he had never experienced. An attack of illness, a bitter disappointment, or a serious loss, would probably have had an influence for good on his whole life. But he had never suffered, and he did not know what suffering meant.

It was a few days after his transaction with George Gilchrist, and Albert Vane was seated at breakfast in his morning-room. Everything about him was

bright, cheerful, and beautiful. The decoration of the apartment was simple, but in exquisite taste, like the *negligé* costume of a pretty and well-bred woman. It was Vane's opinion that a breakfast-room should never have a full-dressed air about it. There should be a certain well-studied ease and carelessness in its appointments, as in the attire of those using it. He himself wore a loose-fitting jacket and slippers, and lounged in a round-backed chair beside a table spread with a delicate and dainty repast.

He was being waited upon by his new "man" Vincent, an invaluable servant, who had replaced his old attendant, Baldwin, discharged through hopeless illness, and now almost forgotten. Vincent had been the best waiter at Vane's club. He was a great favourite with the members, who were not pleased when Vane took him from them, and engaged him in his own service. Vane was very sorry, but what could he do? He wanted a "man," and Vincent happened to be the very man he wanted.

Alert and active, but never fussy or obtrusive, Vincent waited on his master with a skill that almost deserved to be called a fine art. Vane could not sufficiently congratulate himself on the acquisition he had made. Vincent was a better servant, if possible, than even Baldwin. Poor Baldwin! He wondered what had become of him. But the thought was too painful, and he dismissed it.

"Any letters, Vincent?" he asked, after gently drawing his serviette across his fair moustache, in token of his having finished breakfast.

"Yes, sir, two."

Vincent had them ready on a silver tray, and handed them to his employer, after having cut open the envelopes with a penknife.

The valet proceeded quietly to remove the breakfast things, while Vane set himself to examine his correspondence. The first he regarded with a frown of

displeasure or vexation, the second he took up with a smile and a gentle sigh. He evidently recognised the handwriting in each case.

"From Emily," he remarked, as he opened the first letter, "I wonder what she wants? Ah! I suppose it is the old story. Poor thing! I would like to do something for her. But it is impossible, quite out of the question."

Yes, it was from his sister, his foolish, imprudent sister, who had once been his companion, and had kept house for him. She had left him and all the comforts of his luxurious home to marry—for love. He had expostulated against this step, not perhaps so much for her sake as his own. Yet it would have been well for her had she taken her brother's advice. But she married a man without means, or prospects, or energy, and the natural result was poverty and misery. She had appealed to Vane more than once before for pecuniary assistance, and he had given her some help. And now she was "dunning" him again.

"I must put a stop to this," he mused, as he ran his eye over a long statement of troubles and grievances; "I cannot allow myself to be perpetually drained by poor relations. Emily must understand that I cannot be expected to keep her and her thriftless husband."

He threw down the letter impatiently, and sat for a time reflecting.

"Poor Emily," he mused; "we were good friends, and companions for many years. I would like to help her once more. Shall I send her something—if only a trifle? No, what is the use of that? It would be simply pouring water into a sieve. Then, if it reaches the ears of Tom and Ralph, they will be worrying me to assist them too, and I have said a final 'no' to them long ago. No, I must harden my heart once for all, and give Emily to understand that I can do no more for her."

Having formed this resolution, Vane proceeded to open the second letter. A pretty note it looked, written in a delicate female hand, on tinted paper, with the least suspicion of fragrance about it. It thus worded,—

"34 Deal Street, Mayfair.

"Dear Mr Vane,—I am almost ashamed to write to you again, and of course you will guess why I say so. Once more papa has to appeal to your good nature, and to ask you to allow the rent to stand over for a time. He is still a great invalid, quite unable to look after his affairs, and the money he expected to get from India has not yet arrived. You have been only too kind to us already, and I am quite horrified when I think how much we owe you. But it is really impossible for papa to pay this quarter's rent just now, not to speak of the arrears. He tells me to say that he hopes to make some arrangement with you before long, and will be very pleased to see you if you can take the trouble to call one day. Of course he is always at home, you know, and I am always with him. I am truly sorry that we are such bad tenants, but what can we do? I know it is only your kindness that has prevented your turning us out long ago, and believe me, I am deeply grateful to you for it.—I am, yours faithfully,

"Mildred Escombe."

A singularly mixed expression was visible on Albert Vane's countenance as he perused these lines. There were signs of vexation in it, but there were also indications of a softer feeling.

"Turn them out?" he mused, "no, I am not likely to do that. But this chronic impecuniosity of old Escombe is a great nuisance. I have had no rent from him now for a full twelvemonth, and goodness

knows when I shall get any at all. And I could let the house to-morrow if it were vacant. Well, I suppose it can't be helped. Strange, what an influence that girl has over me! I suppose some people would say that I am in love with her. Perhaps I am. Certainly she is the most lovable little creature among all the women I know. There is a charm about her sweet face, an attraction in her dainty figure, which—but, there, I must not give way to sentiment. Well, there is nothing to be done but to let the rent run on. And—yes—I will call at once and talk the matter over, as she says."

He now rose and went upstairs to his study on the first floor, that room which had such an unpleasant outlook. A glance from the window filled him, as often before, with disgust. There were the slatternly women gossiping outside the ginshop at the corner, the idle men in corduroys loafing about with their hands in their pockets, the dirty children playing in the gutter.

"I must shut out this abominable spectacle," he thought, "whether Max lets me have the glass or not. But that would be the very thing for the purpose, and how well it would suit the room!"

The room, in fact, was a very pretty one. It was small, but well proportioned, and, like all other apartments in that elegant dwelling, was decorated with exquisite taste. An elaborately carved oak bookcase, filled for the most part with light literature, in the choicest of bindings, occupied nearly the whole length of the wall on one side. Opposite was the fireplace, with an antique chimney-piece, transported from some ancient *château*, over which was displayed a trophy of arms, with a splendid shield in *répoussé* work, from which radiated spears, swords, daggers, and other weapons, all curiously fashioned and highly ornamented.

In a corner near the window stood a handsome

escritoire of the Louis Quatorze period, which, when opened, showed dainty paintings of shepherds and shepherdesses, *à la Watteau*.

Before this piece of furniture Vane seated himself, and indited a letter to his sister; but not till he had destroyed more than one draft, couched in too good-natured terms, and seeming to convey an indication of yielding on his part. He nerved himself at last to write a comparatively cold and decided refusal. Then he sealed it hastily, and, as though fearing that he might be led to change his mind, he touched the bell for Vincent, and ordered him to have the epistle posted at once.

Having obeyed the order given him, the valet returned, as he knew the time had come when his master would desire to go up and dress. Vincent accordingly accompanied him to his bedroom, where the careful attendant had laid out his clothes, ready for the coming toilet.

Albert Vane was not a fop or dandy in the vulgar sense of the term, but he delighted to think of himself as one of the best-dressed men in London. He employed the most artistic tailor in the trade, and endeavoured to do him the utmost justice. True to his general rule—comfort before all else in everything—he did not choose to sacrifice himself to his clothes, but was always attired in a manner not less easy than elegant. The result was most satisfactory. He always looked well, and always felt comfortable.

His toilet having, with the assistance of Vincent, been at last completed, Albert Vane descended to his drawing-room in order to enjoy once more the sight of George Gilchrist's brilliant array of Chippendales, with which he had now furnished that apartment.

"They look well, Vincent, do they not?" he asked his valet, who had accompanied him to the door.

"Very handsome, indeed, sir."

"Mr Max would have liked to get hold of such a set of furniture as this, don't you think so?"

"Not a doubt of it, sir."

"But you see I forestalled him."

Vincent in reply smiled a flattering smile, accompanied by a shake of the head, indicative of his sense of his master's cleverness.

"He will be very angry about it, Vincent," added Vane.

"I should think he would, sir."

Albert Vane went downstairs, followed by Vincent. His brougham was awaiting him in the street, but he had hardly reached the lower floor when a ring at the visitors' bell made him pause.

He was not wont to receive calls so early, and was a little annoyed at being thus detained. If his carriage had not been standing at the door it would have been easy, of course, to send word that he was not at home. To do so now was impossible.

So he re-entered his morning-room, and awaited the coming of the visitor.

It was by no means a welcome one. Mr Philip Followay was, to him, a terrible bore, one of a class that he regarded as peculiarly objectionable. He was a professed philanthropist, a restless, fussy man, who was mixed up in a score of so-called benevolent schemes, and was an almost irresistible touter for subscriptions.

"So glad to find you in, my dear Mr Vane," cried Mr Followay, mopping his forehead. "What a bit of luck to catch you! But 'the early bird'—you know the proverb."

"I am extremely pleased to see you," replied Vane, whose good temper and politeness never deserted him, "and am very sorry that I have to keep an urgent appointment, for which, to tell you the truth"—here he looked at his watch—"I am a little late already."

"Won't detain you a moment," said the philanthropist; "I only want your name in support of a most excellent movement. I need not go into particulars, the very title of the institution will recommend it to you in an instant. The Asylum for Destitute Washerwomen—just think of that! The good, faithful creatures who have got up our linen for years, the —but there, I won't detain you. You will help us, of course? What shall we say? I don't want even a cheque. The amount will be quite enough, just to put in the list. 'Mr Albert Vane—'"

And the zealous gentleman, with his memorandum book in his hand, had already entered his victim's name in it, and stood only waiting to fill in the amount of that victim's subscription. Artful fellow, Followay! He often "rushed" intended contributors in this way, and not unfrequently succeeded.

"Really, my dear Mr Followay," said Vane, who was not to be so easily caught, "I shall be delighted to do the best I can for you. But it is a matter that requires serious consideration, and I have no time to consider it just now."

Followay, of course, was used to this sort of answer, and was quite ready to meet it.

"Certainly — certainly," he exclaimed, "consider the matter by all means. We could not think of pressing you to the full extent of your generosity at present. Only give us something to start with, just, as the saying goes, to encourage the others. Now, what shall we say? Twenty—ten—five guineas, eh?"

Vane knew his man of old, and had hitherto successfully avoided him, but now the wily subscription-hunter had, so to speak, got him into a corner and run him to earth. He felt, therefore, that only a very strong excuse could shake off his tormentor.

"Well, the fact is," he said, "I don't mind telling you —for I know it will go no further—that I have very

heavy claims upon me just now, and have sustained some severe losses. Here, for instance, are two letters which I have only just received. One is from a near relative making an urgent appeal to me for assistance, and the other from a tenant, who has not paid me any rent for four or five quarters. So you see how I am situated. Some other time, perhaps, I may be able to help you as I could wish, but just now, I assure you it is quite out of my power."

"Hum! ah! well!" replied the baffled philanthropist, "then I suppose we must let the matter stand over for the present. But we may rely upon your assistance for the poor washerwomen at a future time, eh?"

"I hope so, I am sure," exclaimed Vane earnestly.

Then pressing the hand of his visitor very cordially, he allowed him to take his leave.

"Not a bad fellow that Vane," reflected Mr Followay, as he departed; "we shall get something out of him yet."

"It was a good plan," thought Vane, "to tell him of those letters. But it was rather a shabby trick, I'm afraid. However, we could not go through life without little expedients of this sort. And, after all, I was bound to get rid of the bore."

A few moments afterwards he had stepped into his brougham.

"Major Escombe's," he said to the coachman.

CHAPTER V.

THE ESCOMBES.

THE house occupied by Major Escombe and his daughter, and owned by Albert Vane, was only a small one, and was situated in a rather dismal by-street, which ended in a *cul-de-sac*, but it stood in the midst of fashionable Mayfair, and was, therefore, what the estate agents call "a most eligible residence." It was the Major's choice rather than that of his daughter to live there. They were very poor,—entirely dependent on the Major's half-pay, which was always long anticipated by chronic debt. Mildred would have preferred to reside in some pretty country place or by the seaside, in comfortable but cheap lodgings. The Major, however, clung fondly to his old haunts. It was in this district that he had resided in his younger and more prosperous days, and thither he returned from India, although broken in health and impoverished in purse. If he could not mingle any more in the brilliant society of which he was once an ornament, at least he was living near it, and that to him was better than exile in Bloomsbury or Brighton.

True, he could not pay his rent; but Major Escombe had what may be called high-comedy notions on the subject of debt and duns. Credit he regarded as the rightful privilege of a gentleman, and a creditor as his natural, or unnatural, enemy. So he bore his pecuniary difficulties with a light heart, and was the better able to do so as the weight of them fell chiefly on the shoulders of his devoted daughter. She looked after his affairs as well as she could, though she had not much head for business, and her beauty and charm of manner procured for him many an indulgence and averted the pressure of many a claim.

He himself was a confirmed invalid, suffering from a complication of disorders, of which dyspepsia, rheumatism, and gout might be said to be his favourite complaints—that is to say, those which he most liked to talk about. So Mildred was his nurse as well as his housekeeper; and a more gentle or tender nurse an irritable and exacting patient could not desire.

She was devoted to him, hardly ever quitting his couch side except to run out now and then to do a little shopping or other business, mainly on his account, and then often at the risk of being grumbled at, however brief had been her absence, for having been "so long away." When indoors, she would sit beside him for hour and upon hour reading to him, or listening to his interminable reminiscences of his old triumphs in the fashionable world, or bygone Indian adventures. For the Major was an incorrigible and unconscious egotist. There was no subject that had much interest for him except such as concerned himself, or one upon which he could see his way to utter some very strongly pronounced opinions, formed often at a moment's notice.

And what a perfect companion was Mildred! She never contradicted him, never argued with him; always let him have the lion's share of the conversation, and the last word in it; seemed interested in all his stories, drew him out with pertinent questions; laughed at his jokes when, being out of pain, he happened to be in a good humour; and when he was in an angry or scolding mood remained meekly silent.

They had few visitors, and most of these were "old fogies," people who had known the Major either at home or abroad in former times. The only other person who ever called upon them was their friendly landlord, Albert Vane, and his visits of late had become more and more frequent.

It need hardly be said that Vane did not call to see Major Escombe, though he got much credit from

the Major's daughter for doing so. It was so kind of him, she would say, thus to come and sit with poor papa, and cheer him in his solitude. Vane, for his part, was glad to have the motive of his visits so interpreted, but as a matter of fact, the conversation of the egotistical Major was to him an intense and all but insufferable bore. Yet he endured it with resignation on account of the opportunity it gave him of being in the company of the young and beautiful girl, for whom he felt an ever-increasing admiration.

That delicate subject of the rent had never hitherto been discussed on such occasions. Mildred had usually written to Vane about it when the quarter-day was past, and his reply always took the form of a personal assurance, addressed to her out of her father's hearing, that she need not trouble herself about the matter, and that he was quite willing to let the debt stand over. And how grateful the poor child was to him for this further proof of his kindness and friendship! Albert Vane was, in her eyes, a very hero of self-denial and generosity.

Vane could not but perceive that he had made an impression on the simple girl's heart. He had no thought of marriage, but, to do him justice, he had no other thought with regard to Mildred Escombe. He utterly refused to face the future of their acquaintance whenever the suggestion of it presented itself to his mind. He was content to enjoy the present; to revel in the delight of Mildred's society, to look upon her sweet face, to hear her soft, musical voice, and watch the movements of her graceful form as she flitted about the room in attendance on her ailing parent. She had attracted him, but she had not caught him—not, indeed, that she ever attempted to do so.

About noon on the day when Vane received Mildred's appealing letter, the Major was reclining, as

usual, on his invalid couch—an ingenious contrivance, the gift of his singularly generous landlord. In appearance he might be described as a handsome wreck. His features were regular and refined, and he still retained his old military air. But he looked at least ten years more than his age of fifty. His hair and moustache were almost white, his face was haggard and yellow, and he had all the aspect of a strong man prostrated by weakness.

Mildred sat near him, a complete contrast to her companion. She was nearly nineteen years of age, but looked at least a year younger. Her beauty was of the soft and *petite* order. She had reddish brown hair and hazel eyes, and a very delicate, white skin—probably she would not have looked so pale had she not been so constantly confined to her father's sick-room—and she had a deliciously rounded figure, while her hands, perfect in shape, seemed to have stopped growing in her childhood. So had her feet, when a glimpse of them was to be caught.

She had been reading aloud some of the most interesting passages from a morning paper, one of her daily duties, and her father apparently had heard enough of the news to satisfy him, for he said,—

"There, that will do."

Mildred then proceeded to peruse a column about the latest fashions for her own private gratification, when the Major interrupted her with the question,—

"Did you write to Vane?"

"Yes, papa."

"What did he say?"

"He has not replied. I suppose he will call."

"H'm—what did you write?"

"I told him that you were obliged to ask him again for a little more time to pay the rent—"

"I did not wish you to *ask* him, Mildred," said the Major somewhat pettishly. "I did not want you to put it to him as a favour. It was only necessary to

inform him that it would be inconvenient for me to meet his claim just now. That would have been quite sufficient. Mr Vane is a gentleman, not a tradesman, and understands my position."

"Oh, well, papa dear," cried Mildred cheerily, "I daresay it comes to the same thing. What I wrote was only a civil way of putting it, you know. And, after all, Mr Vane has been very kind."

"Yes, yes, that is all very well: but you know I don't like to ask favours."

The proud Major did not add that he had no objection to accept favours. As for Mildred, she said no more.

In fact, father and daughter sat together for some time after this in silence, which at last was interrupted by the sound of a quiet knock at the street door below. Mildred knew the knock, and her recognition of it brought the colour to her cheek, and a sparkle to her eyes.

"Who is that?" cried the Major, in an impatient tone. "What a nuisance to be disturbed in this way, just when I felt inclined for a doze!"

"It is only Mr Vane, I think," said Mildred; "shall I go down to him?"

"I wish you would," replied her father. "I feel tired."

Mildred did not wait for further directions, but having comfortably adjusted the Major's pillows, and placed his hand-bell within his reach, quitted the room, and descended to the ground floor.

Albert Vane had been shown into the sitting-room as usual, and Mildred met on the staircase the servant-maid, who was coming up to announce the visitor.

Having taken a peep at herself in the glass attached to the umbrella-stand in the passage, and put a little touch to her hair, she entered the room where Vane was waiting, and shook hands with him with more than usual cordiality.

Albert Vane was delighted at this reception, and accepted the fair girl's apologies for her father very cheerfully indeed.

"Papa is not very well this morning," she said. "Of course he never is. But he feels languid and drowsy, and a nap sometimes brightens him up. He will be very pleased to see you presently, I am sure."

"Meanwhile, Miss Escombe," observed Vane, "I am glad of this opportunity of having a word with you alone. I received your note this morning, and of course I came to reply to it in person at once."

"You are always so good," murmured Mildred, casting down her eyes.

"I suppose I need not say what is my answer. I am sorry—truly sorry—for your father's difficulties, and hope things will take a turn for the better with him before long. Meanwhile, my dear Miss Escombe, pray consider this house your home and his. It is, believe me, a pleasure to think that it is you who are occupying it."

"Oh, Mr Vane," cried Mildred, lifting her eyes and gazing earnestly into his face; "how can I sufficiently thank you for all your kindness to us?"

"How?" echoed Vane; "why, by saying nothing more about it."

"But I must say more. Strangers as we were a year or two ago, you have acted as a true friend. I really don't know what we should have done without your generous indulgence. There are very few people, I am afraid, who would have been so considerate, and but for this, we must have gone into some wretched lodging, where I am sure papa would have been miserable, perhaps even worse in health than he is. Cannot you imagine how grateful I feel to you, when I tell you that I believe I owe to you my father's life itself?"

There were tears in the fair girl's eyes as she

uttered these words, and never, to Vane's thinking, did she appear so lovely. Certainly gratitude is very becoming to a pretty woman, when one's self is the object of it. He felt strongly tempted to seize the opportunity of conveying to Miss Escombe some hint of the attachment with which she had inspired him. But he restrained himself. No, as he had repeated in his mind many a time, it would not do. He must not commit himself to any avowal.

"Well," he said, with a smile, "then let us consider that matter settled. And now let me drop the landlord and assume the friend. I am going to ask you and your father, when he is well enough to drive out, to come and see me. Of course I will send or bring round my cab, in which he will be perfectly comfortable. I think you would be pleased to see my house, as I happen to have some rather pretty things in it. I have quite an old maid's love of furniture and knick-knacks, and have just bought some really lovely Chippendale tables, and so forth. They belonged to a poor friend of mine who had got into difficulties and wanted to sell them, so I bought them of him at his own price."

"That is so like you, Mr Vane," exclaimed Miss Escombe. "I really think you are the most good-natured and unselfish man in the world."

"No, no," replied Vane; "you flatter me. I like to do a friend a good turn, I admit. It is—what shall I say?—a weakness of mine—I can't help it. But, as a matter of fact, I have done myself a service in this transaction, as the furniture is a beautiful set—quite unique—you really must see it."

"Oh, I should be so pleased to come," cried Mildred, "when papa is better. He varies very much, but some fine day, when he is in the humour for a drive, and if you happen to be here, you must carry us off and show us your lovely house. I am sure it must be charming."

"It suits me at any rate," said Vane. "I must say I like to surround myself with beautiful objects. But I have had a disappointment lately, in not being able to secure a magnificent Venetian mirror which I covet very much."

"Indeed! How was that? Was it sold?"

"No. Strange to say it belongs to an old dealer named Max, a queer, eccentric fellow, who refuses to sell it, at any rate for the present, and for a very curious reason."

"What is that?"

"You will laugh when I tell you, Miss Escombe, but the superstitious fellow says, and really believes, that it is a magic mirror, capable of producing some mysterious and potent effect upon any one who owns it."

"Oh, how delightful! How I should like to see it! Though I should be frightened to look into it, I am sure."

"Well, I am afraid you will not have the chance. It is only to be seen at Max's place in Wardour Street, and at present there seems little prospect of my getting possession of it, as I fear I have offended the old man."

"Indeed! How?"

"Oh, it is nothing particular, only a little dispute or difference over a matter of business, which perhaps we shall be able to settle after all."

"I hope you will, and that you will get this wonderful looking-glass. You deserve to have all you want, all that can make you happy."

Mildred uttered these words with earnestness, looking Vane full in the face, without a thought of the meaning that might be attached to what she had said. Vane was acutely conscious of that possible meaning. What an opportunity was here presented, what a cue she had given him, if he could have yielded to the impulse that was prompting him to an avowal of love!

But once more he controlled himself. No; even Mildred Escombe, though she had stolen his heart, must not rob him of his liberty.

After they had chatted a little longer, Mildred's quick ear caught the sound of her father's hand-bell.

"Papa is awake, now," she cried, rising; "and I must go up to him. Will you come? He will be very glad to see you; but I must ask you to wait in the next room to his for a moment. He is sometimes just a little grumpy after a nap."

Miss Escombe hastened upstairs, Albert Vane following her, and, as she requested, entered a small room adjoining the invalid's chamber.

"Where have you been, Mildred?" asked her father in an irritable tone, "you should not have left me so long, it is very inconsiderate of you, very."

Mildred attempted no explanation, no excuse. She knew from long experience that none was wanted. It was always best to let her father have his growl out without answering him.

"Would you like a little lemonade, dear?" she asked presently, knowing as a matter of fact that that was exactly what he would require after a short sleep. She had a glass of the refreshing liquid already in her hand, so there was no need for a reply. Then she ventured to say, "Mr Vane is here still, papa; would you care to see him?"

"Eh?" cried the Major; "no—what? yes, let him come in."

Feeling a little better after his nap and drink, Major Escombe now became inclined for conversation, and Albert Vane was always a welcome companion, he was such a patient listener.

"How d'ye do, Vane?" he said, as his visitor entered the room. "Glad to see you. Sit down. What sort of weather is it out of doors? East wind, eh? Bah! beastly climate! I wish I were back in India, I do, by Gad. I believe it would be the best thing for me."

"And for other people," Vane mentally observed.

"But, of course, I am forced to stay here; the very worst place for me. I might have a chance if I could go to the south of France or Algiers, but it is just like my luck; I can never get what I want. If I had had the Colonelcy, as I ought to have done, I should have been in a very different position. Upon my word, I don't think there ever was a more unfortunate man than I am."

In this strain the much troubled Major went on for a considerable time. All his talk was about his woes and disappointments, and his most recent sensations as an invalid.

Mildred sat silent during the recital, while Albert Vane enhanced the admiration with which she regarded him by his exemplary patience in listening to the sick man's maunderings. Rarely, indeed, did he submit to be bored in this way; rarely, that is to say, in any other house than that which sheltered Mildred Escombe. But even the tedium of the tiresome Major's conversation was not too great a price to pay for the pleasure he enjoyed in Mildred's society, and he showed no sign, in his sympathetic and smiling countenance, of the intense disgust and weariness with which her father's lamentations inspired him.

After enduring this torture for a decent interval, Albert Vane rose, and took his departure. Mildred accompanied him to the door of the room, and gave an extra pressure to his hand in bidding him good-bye.

"I have to thank you again," she whispered; "you have put papa in a good temper for the rest of the day."

So Albert Vane left the house with a beating heart.

"What a sweet girl she is!" he thought, as he entered his brougham; "what a wife she would make if—if—if I could be such a fool as to marry!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN FOR THE MIRROR.

ALBERT VANE was not mistaken in the belief that his recent transaction with George Gilchrist would excite the wrath of Reuben Max. The old dealer had made certain of being able to secure that precious set of Chippendales. The course of action which he had commenced with his needy customer in this instance was one that he had often practised before, and always hitherto with success. Making a low offer to his victim to begin with, he would, to use his own phrase, "leave him to stew in it;" then he would advance his bids, little by little, till he and his customer came to terms.

He fully expected to receive another visit from Gilchrist in a day or two, and it never dawned upon him that a third party might step in and snatch away his bargain from under his very nose. So confident, indeed, was he in this anticipation, that he actually regarded the Chippendales as practically his own, and made his arrangements for disposing of them at a large profit. Two or three of his clients were very partial to this class of furniture, and were rich enough to indulge their peculiar fancy.

"Ach, my dear!" he said one day to Mr Bullion a wealthy banker, who had a "taste," "I shall have a beaudiful lot of Shippendales soon—quite a splendid lot; noding like dem to be had anyveres. Really genuine beyont doubt, and in beaudiful condition."

"What are you going to do with them, Max?" asked the banker.

"Vat shall I do mid dem?" cried Max. "Ach, mein Gott! vy, sell dem, sell dem, of course."

"That does not follow, you know," retorted his

customer; "you won't sell that Venetian mirror, and perhaps there's something magical about this furniture, too."

"No, no," exclaimed the dealer in a solemn tone; "dat is diverent. De mirror is von ding, and de Shippendales is anoder. Gome now, Mr Bullion, shall I keep dem vor you? You shall have dem sheap—quite sheap."

"Well, Max, I should like to see them first. You have not got them yet?"

"No; but I shall have dem in a few days, a very few days, here in my varehouse. Now, vat do you say? Vill you take dem if you shall like dem? You shall have de very first shance, you shall, indeed."

"H'm—well—Max—what do you call cheap? What is likely to be about the price?"

"Ach, a drifle, just a mere drifle, not more as vive hundred bounds—dat is sheap—yes."

The banker whistled in astonishment.

"They must be good indeed to be worth five hundred pounds," he observed; "but, as I said before, I can't say anything about the things till I have seen them. When you have actually got them here, let me know."

On this understanding Mr Bullion departed, leaving the dealer more eager than ever to complete his bargain.

Days passed, and still there was no sign of George Gilchrist. He neither called nor wrote. Reuben Max grew uneasy.

"I vonder vat he is about," mused the dealer; "shall he have sold dem to somebody else? Ach, Gott! If dat should be so!"

Thus, when more than a week had elapsed without any further communication from Gilchrist, Mr Max took the desperate resolve to go and call upon his old customer in person, and make him a fresh offer.

"I shall have to bay tear vor dis, I shall," he re-

flected, "but, no madder, I must have dose Shippendales."

So one day George Gilchrist was greatly astonished to receive a visit from Reuben Max, who entered grinning and gracious, but still somewhat nervous, as he glanced from side to side of the room into which he was ushered, and noted its denuded appearance.

"Well, Mr Max," asked Gilchrist, very stiffly, "and what can I do for you?"

"Ach! my dear," replied the dealer, "you know vat I have come about. Dose Shippendales. Come now, I am going to make you a vair offer, I am indeed. You know my vays, it's business. Look here now. A hundred bounds for de Shippendales."

"You need not trouble yourself further, Mr Max," said Gilchrist, in the same cold tone as before; "the furniture is no longer for sale."

"Now, now, now," cried Mr Max, "dat is your little joke. You shall not sell de Shippendales because I shall not sell de mirror. Very good, very good, but it is not business. Come now, a hundred bounds; it is a good brice."

"Mr Max," said Gilchrist, "I cannot sell you the Chippendales for a very sufficient reason—I have sold them already."

"Vat! You have sold dem! Ach, mien Gott! And after I have made you an offer."

"Such an offer!" exclaimed Gilchrist scornfully.

"Vell, vell, you know my vay. You know I vould not stick at dat. You know I vould deal fairly mid you, Mr Gilchrist, and I vould give you a good price at last. I vould not have stuck at a hundred bounds neider, for I like you, Mr Gilchrist, and I vould do my best for you, if I lost money by it—by Gott, I vould!"

The old man's tone was so earnest, and his disappointment was evidently so acute, that Gilchrist could not but feel a little touched.

"Well," he said in a softened tone, "it is too late to talk about the matter now. The things were sold really on the very day when I saw you last, ay, and within a very few hours afterwards."

"Sold on the very day—a few hours?" exclaimed the dealer. "Sold? And to whom?"

Gilchrist paused for a moment to reflect; then he said,—

"I don't see why I should conceal the circumstances from you, Mr Max. The fact is, I parted with my furniture to one whom you know well—Mr Albert Vane."

The old dealer staggered backward as though he had been struck.

"Mr Albert Vane! Mr Albert Vane!" he exclaimed. "Ach, mein Gott! Dat vas a dirty drick to blay me. He heard me bargain mid you in my own shop, and den he comes here and buys me out. Ach! dat vas a dirty drick!"

George Gilchrist took no trouble to argue with Mr Max as to the ethics of the transaction, and so allowed the old dealer to leave his house without either contradiction or consolation. Naturally he could not be expected to sympathise with the dealer's disappointment. Max could have had the Chippendales if he had not been so greedy for a bargain. And Gilchrist reflected with satisfaction that he had parted with his much-prized furniture to a gentleman rather than to a tradesman, and that therefore there might be some chance—if fortune favoured him—of recovering it hereafter.

Reuben Max went home full of bitter disappointment and wrath. To lose a bargain was bad enough, but to be tricked out of it—for so he regarded the matter—in such a way, was in his eyes an outrage of the first magnitude. Never had such a mishap befallen him in the whole course of his career as a buyer and seller. And the good old fellow was the more

chagrined at this disaster as he had really made up his mind to behave at last not only fairly, but generously, to George Gilchrist, whose character he respected, and whose conduct he admired. He had resolved to give him all the help he needed to get out of his difficulties. But, as he had said, "he must have his bargain first." And now he had been robbed of his bargain!

Albert Vane had not put in an appearance in Reuben Max's shop during those first days of the old man's anger. He could not expect that his transaction with George Gilchrist would long remain a secret. He felt sure that sooner or later Max would make an attempt to secure the furniture at his own price, and then he would learn that he had been outbidden. Vane knew that he would be furious at this discovery, and was, therefore, little disposed to face him. Still he was very unwilling to lose all further chance of picking up "a good thing" at the dealer's shop, and he earnestly hoped that the storm would soon blow over, and that he would find some means of conciliating him at last.

He was the more anxious for this result, as he grew increasingly eager to get into his possession that much coveted Venetian mirror.

"It is really disgusting," he remarked to Vincent one afternoon, pointing from his study window at the scene of squalor and misery that was presented from that point of view.

"It is indeed, sir," replied the valet.

"That mirror," said Vane, "would be the very thing to cover up the lower part of the window, and there would be still plenty of light from the top to illuminate the room."

"It is a pity you can't induce Mr Max to part with it, sir," observed Vincent.

"Yes," replied his master; "and the worst of it is, I am afraid the old fellow will be too savage at my purchase of those Chippendales to sell me the glass now."

"You might try him, sir," suggested Vincent. "He is a sharp man of business, and, excuse me for saying it, sir, but I don't think he would stand in his own light only to spite you."

"There is something in what you say, Vincent," observed Vane. "I will try him, at any rate. I can but see how the land lies, and if he refuses, I shall be no worse off than I was before."

Reuben Max had passed from the wrathful to the sulky stage at the time when Vane was driving down once more to Wardour Street. The dealer was seated, as he often sat, before the magic mirror, which, with all his belief in its supernatural qualities, had no terrors for him. He had an open book on his knees, an old volume printed in black letter, and in the German language, and a certain page in it he was reading again for the hundredth time.

"Yes," he mused, "it is de same, dere cannot be two made at de same date by de same maker. Ach! It must be a wonderful ding, if dis be drue. And it is drue, I do not doubt. Dere have been magic mirrors in de East. De scientific beople who believes noding account for de vonders of de Jabanese mirrors in vat dey call a natural way. Bah! vat do dey know of nature? Dere is a nature of de earth, and a nature dat is not of de earth. Dey understand de von, but not de oder. Who does understand de sbiridual life of man, and de great unseen? Vere is de limids of de possible? Not in dis world. Ach! it is not so. Vat shall dey laugh at my magic mirror for? Have I not seen myself, mid my own eyes, de common dables and shairs move and dance, and fly in de air under de influences? Den vy should not de mirror have dis bower? Yes, I vill dry him, for now I have de chance. Yes, I dink I have. Dere is only von man for de mirror, dat I know, dere is only von."

By a singular coincidence the very man he had in his mind was at that moment looking over his

shoulder. Vane had entered with quiet step while Max was still absorbed in his studies and reflections, and had to address him by name in order to attract his attention. The old man started, and hastily closed his book. He did not for the moment look round, but fixed his eyes on the mirror before him, in which he saw Vane's comely, well-dressed figure reflected as well as his own gaunt, slovenly-attired form.

Those keen eyes of his glittered with a sort of gleeful malice while he rose to greet his visitor; but, as he faced him, his manner in an instant became as unctuous and deferential as of yore.

"So, Mr Albert Vane," he said, "you have gome to see me? Dat is very good—dat is very vriently. It is a long time dat I have not seen you, sir—ach! it is so."

"I am very glad to hear you speak like this, Mr Max," remarked Vane, though feeling a little nervous at the peculiar tone of the dealer. "I hope it means that you have forgiven me about that little bit of business the other day?"

"Dat little bit of business?" echoed the old man. "Dear me, vat vas dat? Ach, so! I recollect him. Dose Shippendales vot you buy? Ach! you bad man, Mr Vane, you got de best of poor old Max over dat. Yes, you did go and buy me out. Dat vas a bold stroke. I never did a better von of its sort myself."

"And you have done a good many, you know, Max, in your time," said Vane, feeling a little more encouraged.

"Ach! yes, I have. I have had my bargains, and goot vons, but I never lost von before—never before dis dime. It is very vunny. Not so?"

"I am glad you look at it in that light. I was afraid you would be angry; perhaps you were at first, but I am sure that you are too much a man

of the world not to know that every one must look after himself in little matters of this sort."

"Yes, yes; dat is so. Everybody for himself. Dat is good morals—very good morals in business, and out of business too. You are a clever man, Mr Vane—a more clever man as poor old Max."

Albert Vane felt greatly flattered by this compliment, and much reassured by the old dealer's conciliatory demeanour. So he resolved to seize the opportunity and make an attempt, at least, to obtain that which he so greatly desired.

"Well then, Max," he said, "we are friends once more."

"Have we ever been anything but friends, Mr Vane?"

"I hope not. But come now, in token—I will not say of our renewed, but of our old friendship—say what is the lowest price you will take for that mirror, and let me have it, like a good fellow as you are."

"Ach! shall I say vat I shall dake for de mirror?" cried Max, in a tone the character of which greatly puzzled his visitor. "How I should like you to have him, better as nobody! I vould like to give him to you for noding, so I vould."

"Come, Max, I don't expect that."

"No, no, my dear; dat is not business. And you vant him, eh? Vat for?"

"Well, to quote your own words the other day,—'to see myself in it.'"

"Ach, yes! to see yourself, Mr Vane, your own very, very self? Vell, let me see—yes—you shall have him."

Albert Vane could hardly believe his ears.

"Do you really mean it?" he asked.

"Ach! yes, I do—I mean it—yes."

"But the price?" asked Vane anxiously, as he fully expected that the wily old dealer would put a pro-

hibitive value on his treasure; some hundreds at least.

"De brice? Vell—let me see. For an old vriend like you, Mr Vane, if I may call you so—and a good customer and a shentleman, who has alvays behaved like a shentleman to me—never mind de Shippendales—vat shall ve say? Vould it hurt you if ve say vivty bounds?"

Fifty pounds! Albert Vane would gladly have given twice that sum for the precious glass. He could hardly believe that the dealer was in earnest. But he was. Without a suspicion of banter in his voice, Reuben Max calmly repeated his offer, with which, needless to say, Vane eagerly closed.

"I will give you the money on the spot," said he, preparing to take out his cheque book. But Reuben Max held up his skinny hand, and rejected the offer with something like a look of alarm.

"No, no, Mr Vane, not yet. Not till you shall get him home in your own beaudiful house. Not till you shall blace him in your vindow and shut out de sight of dose boor beoples. Not till you can say dat you like him and vill keep him as all your own, your very own, to see yourself in him day by day, your own very, very self. Den you shall bay me, and I vill give you a receipt in vull for vot you owe me."

"Then you will send the glass to my house soon?" asked Vane.

"To-morrow it shall be dere."

"You promise me?"

"Ubon my vord of honour," said the dealer in his gravest tone, and placing his hand on his breast.

"What a queer old fellow it is!" mused Vane, as he stepped into his carriage. "Surely it is not possible that there can be any mischief in this mirror. What folly! Why, I should be as superstitious as he to give a second thought to such idle nonsense!"

CHAPTER VII.

A DRIVE TO THE CITY.

PLEASED as a child by the promise of a new toy, Albert Vane drove home rejoicing over the success he had just achieved. There was, indeed, much of the spoilt child in his composition. He had never denied himself any pleasure or luxury that he coveted, and he had the means of securing pretty nearly everything he wanted. This difficulty about the Venetian mirror was perhaps the first check of its kind that he had ever experienced, and lo! it was now overcome. Vane congratulated himself equally on his good fortune and his diplomatic skill. It is pleasant to feel that one is not only lucky, but clever.

He was eager to see the much-desired looking-glass in its new place, and was determined to lose no time in preparing for its reception. Vincent, with his unfailing readiness of resource, would make the necessary arrangements, and, as he sped homeward, Vane dwelt with delighted anticipation upon the feeling of surprise with which his sympathetic valet would receive the news of his victory.

"Well, Vincent," he said, as soon as he had entered his morning-room, accompanied by his attendant, "I have done it at last."

"Got the mirror, sir?" asked the valet, with becoming astonishment; "you don't say that?"

"Yes, I have persuaded old Max to let me have it, and remarkably cheap too. He has actually parted with it for fifty pounds."

"Really, sir?"

"Now, Vincent, my good fellow, I must leave the arrangements for the fitting up of the glass to you. It will be here to-morrow, I don't know at what time

exactly, but probably early in the day. Meanwhile, you must get in a couple of workmen, and have the window-frame prepared for it. You know what I want exactly, as we have gone over the whole matter before. I don't care to see the thing until it is fitted into its place, and I must trust you to get the job done properly."

"You can depend upon that, sir."

"You understand precisely what is wanted?"

"Exactly, sir."

Having given these orders, Albert Vane once more re-entered his brougham, and told the man to drive to Major Escombe's.

"What an invaluable fellow that is!" reflected Vane. "Baldwin was not a patch on him. Ah! poor Baldwin, I wonder what has become of him? I should have liked to do something for him, but he went away without leaving his address, so what could I do?"

Albert Vane did not trouble himself with the thought that he had made no attempt whatever to ascertain his old servant's whereabouts; in fact, he did not trouble himself with any further thought on the subject. His mind ran into a new channel.

"Mildred Escombe will be surprised to hear my news, and pleased, too. How sympathetic that little woman is! Everything that interests me seems to interest her, from the smallest to the greatest, and sympathy from a sweet girl like that is very pleasant. Ah! I must be careful what I am about with her. I rather think she loves me, poor child, and if I could bring myself to commit matrimony it is she of all women whom I would choose. But no, that is not to be thought of; I cannot sacrifice my freedom, even for her, charming as she is. Yet I ought not to go on visiting her in this way; the Mrs Grundys of the world would say it is very wrong. Well, perhaps it is, but it is very delightful; the greatest pleasure I

have in life. I wonder what will come of it, if anything?"

Albert Vane did not care to answer his own question. It was his habit never to burthen his mind with difficult problems of the distant future, the present and its enjoyments were enough for him.

In this frame of mind he sped rapidly on his way to Mayfair, but he was not so absorbed in thought as to be altogether unmindful of what was passing around him. He glanced now and again from his carriage window at the people hurrying by, on foot or on horseback, or driving like himself in their own vehicles; and here and there he recognised an acquaintance, and lifted his hat in graceful salute.

He had arrived in Piccadilly, at a point not far from the spot where it would be necessary to turn up a by-street in order to reach the dwelling of the Escombes, when he caught sight of a figure which in a moment his rapidly-driven brougham had passed by. The figure was one which he admired more than any other in the world; that, in fact, of Mildred Escombe herself. She was walking along Piccadilly, eastward, with quick, short steps, as though in great haste. Instantly Vane communicated with his coachman, and ordered him to turn and drive back.

"Don't go far," he cried. "I will tell you when to stop."

In little more than half a minute he had overtaken the fair fugitive, and as his skilful coachman swiftly drew up to the curb of the pavement, Miss Escombe for the first time perceived her friend. She paused in her walk, and Albert Vane alighted from the brougham. She blushed, and seemed a little confused as she took his proffered hand.

"Oh, Mr Vane," she said, "you were coming to see us, were you not? And I should have missed you."

"Yes, I was on my way to Deal Street; but I

suppose I had quicker eyes than you—luckily for me. How fortunate it was I happened to see you!"

"Yes," replied Mildred, but in a slightly constrained tone; "I should have been sorry to be out when you called, though papa is a good deal better to-day, and is able to spare me for a short time."

"Were you going far?" asked Vane.

"Well," answered Mildred with some hesitation, "I was on my way to the city."

"To the city!" echoed Vane; "why, surely, Miss Escombe, you were not going to walk all the way to the city?"

"Oh, yes, it is not so very far, and it would do me good. I don't get much exercise. But do not let me detain you, Mr Vane, and to tell you the truth, I am rather in a hurry myself. I mustn't keep papa waiting too long, as he is quite alone."

Vane quickly appreciated the situation, and it occurred to him at once to do a kind and gracious act. Why should he not offer Miss Escombe his carriage, and spare her the fatigue of that long journey on foot? But an instinct that never failed him interposed to check this generous impulse. If he were to give up his carriage to Mildred, he must walk or take a common cab. True, it was only a very short distance to Deal Street, and he might go thither and await Mildred's return—wait, listening to the Major's conversation about his aches, and pains, and other interesting particulars concerning himself. That was not to be thought of, but what was he to do? In a moment a new suggestion occurred to him, better than the first. Might he not offer to drive Miss Escombe to the city? A good idea!

"I cannot bear the notion of your walking all that way," he said; "let me take you in my carriage, you would get there in less than half the time, and I could bring you back as quickly."

Mildred paused to consider the proposal, not on the

score of propriety. It never crossed her simple childish mind that there was anything unbecoming in her acceptance of such an offer from one, whom, although he was a young man, she regarded as an old friend. Her hesitation was based on grounds of delicacy, but of quite another character. These she did not explain, but she made a natural excuse.

"It is very kind of you," she said, "but I could not think of giving you such trouble, and taking up your time."

"I assure you it would be no trouble," replied Vane; "and as for my time, that is worth nothing. I have no engagement this morning, and only intended to go to my club after having called at your house. Come, now, let me drive you down, and bring you back soon to your father, unless indeed you are afraid to trust yourself with me."

That last suggestion removed Mildred's only scruple, so she said,—

"Afraid to trust myself with you, Mr Vane? Oh, no, indeed, I am not. Well, as you are so very kind, it *would* save time, and papa fidgets so when I am away."

So she allowed Vane to hand her into the brougham, telling him as she did so that her destination was a certain office in Old Broad Street.

"What a delicious carriage!" she cried, as she sank back into the comfortable hinder seat, while Vane sat *vis-à-vis* to her. "How delightful it must be always to be able to drive about in this luxurious way!"

"Oh," replied Vane laughing, "one gets used to luxuries of this sort till one hardly appreciates them. I wish I could oftener have an opportunity of giving you a drive, and shall be very pleased to do so when papa is able to go out."

He did not offer to place his carriage at their disposal without his own company, but it never occurred to Mildred that he might have been thus obliging.

"So you are going to the city on business, eh?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Mildred again, with a slight air of constraint; "it is about private affairs of papa's."

"Anything in which I can be of service?" inquired her companion.

"Oh, no," answered Mildred eagerly, "it is nothing that I could trouble you about, or even speak of."

The subject of her mission seemed so plainly to embarrass Miss Escombe that Vane at once turned to another, in fact, to one about which he was longing to speak.

"By-the-bye," he said, "I am sure you will be pleased to hear that I have managed to secure that mirror at last."

"Oh! I *am* glad to hear that," Mildred replied. "I remember you said you wanted it so much, and that ill-natured old thing—Mr—Mr—"

"Max."

"Yes, Max, would not sell it you for some mysterious reason."

"Well, I have overcome his objection at last, and he has let me have it quite cheap."

"And have you really got it?"

"I have not exactly got it into my possession, but I expect to have it fitted up in my house some time to-morrow."

"That is good news. I am always so glad to hear of anything that pleases you. And is there really something magical about this looking-glass?"

"That I cannot discover till the thing is actually my own property, so as soon as it is in the house I mean to send old Max the money for it, and then, of course, it will be ready to do its worst."

"Oh, but do you believe there is anything in the story which Mr Max tells about it?" asked Mildred, with a look of anxiety and alarm.

"Not a bit," replied Vane laughing. "He is the most superstitious old fellow in the world, and is always attaching strange legends and supernatural powers to articles that he has for sale. The glass can do me no harm."

"I hope not," said Mildred; "but I shall be so anxious to hear about it when you have got it home. You will come and see us directly afterwards, will you not?"

"Certainly; and you must examine my appearance very carefully, so as to see whether I have undergone any transformation. If you find me just the same as usual, of course you will know that nothing has happened."

These words, spoken in a tone of mere trifling or jest, were listened to by Mildred with a smile; but still a certain look of uneasiness was visible in her countenance. Vane felt pleased and flattered at this evidence of her anxiety. But he took no advantage of it. He did not ask her why she feared for him; he made no attempt to evoke any indication of the tender sentiment which he knew she entertained with regard to him. Presently he started a new subject of conversation, and interchanging light gossip on a variety of trifling topics, he and his companion found the time pass quickly and pleasantly enough. This *tête-à-tête* in the brougham was delightful to both. Vane was fond of pleasure, and that drive through the streets with the sweetest and prettiest girl he knew was a pleasure such as he rarely enjoyed. As for Mildred, she had never dared to ask herself what were her sentiments with regard to that handsome, amiable young gentleman. She was always thinking of him; always extolling him in her heart of hearts; and the thought of him made her feel sometimes happy, sometimes sad. Matters had gone with her no further than that. Some might say they had gone quite far enough under the circumstances. In ordinary cases that

carriage drive must have brought the relations between these two young people to a crisis; but this was not an ordinary case, as Albert Vane was not an ordinary man.

As she neared her destination, Mildred seemed less inclined to converse. She responded to her friend's remarks briefly, and with a somewhat absent air. She appeared pensive and nervous, while Vane looked at her with puzzled and curious eyes. What, he thought, could be the object of her mission to the city? But he did not venture to question her further.

At last they arrived at the door of the office in Old Broad Street. Albert Vane alighted and handed out his companion.

"I hope I shall not have to keep you long," she said. "But as you have been so kind as to bring me here, I must ask you to wait a little."

"I am in no hurry, I assure you," replied Vane, "and don't at all mind waiting."

Then she left him and tripped up the office steps. Vane noticed from the inscription on the door of the office that the premises were occupied by a firm of solicitors, Messrs Crewe and Hardcastle, and hence, considering the circumstances of Mildred's father, he quickly guessed the purpose of her visit.

"There is some question of money in it," he reflected; "I wonder to what extent? I would offer to assist them if the difficulty is not too serious. She would think better of me than ever if I did; and she thinks well enough of me—too well already, poor child! I ought not to continue to hang about her in this way. I am determined not to entangle myself in the matrimonial net and I ought not to endanger her happiness. But what can I do? I cannot separate myself from her, yet I cannot unite myself to her. Oh! what a miserable world is this, in which a man is forbidden to enjoy a charming girl's society without

the thought that he is bound either to marry her or leave her!"

Albert Vane had plenty of time to dwell upon the fascinations of his fair companion and the embarrassing position in which he found himself on her account, for her interview with the solicitors was somewhat protracted. Under other circumstances, so long a detention would have seriously annoyed him, as he did not like to be kept waiting for anybody or anything. It was a marked sign of his attachment to Mildred Escombe that he should have made such a sacrifice for her sake without a murmur.

At length she appeared. She descended the steps of the office slowly, and Vane could not but perceive that she was disappointed and distressed, for she looked very sad and pale.

"We will go back, please," she said, as Vane assisted her to re-enter the brougham.

They sat silent for a short time, and Mildred occupied herself by gazing through the carriage window, but apparently without aim or interest. Vane watched her intently, wondering what was the cause of her evident trouble, but he did not like to ask. He began to think that that drive home was not so pleasant as the journey to the city.

Presently Mildred roused herself. She felt that she not acting courteously or gratefully to Mr Vane, who had been so kind, and she appreciated the delicacy with which he abstained from pressing her to speak.

"He sees that I am in trouble," she thought, "and will not vex me with questions or with conversation about other things."

So, with a forced smile, she ventured some common-place observation about the crowded and noisy state of the thoroughfare through which they were driving; but the effort was too much for her. Her voice faltered, and the tears gathered in her eyes.

"My dear Miss Escombe," cried Vane, bending towards her with a look of sympathy, "something distresses you; you have failed in the object of your visit to those lawyers—is it not so?

Mildred cast down her eyes before replying, and then, looking up, said with a sigh,—

"Yes. I have failed."

"Come now," exclaimed Vane cheerfully, "let me know what troubles you. I think I have a right to call myself your friend, and I am sure you know that you can trust me. If it is a secret, you may depend upon me to keep it: if it is anything in which I can be of service to you, you may be certain that I will do what I can to help you."

His manner was so soft, so gentle, so earnest, that every word he uttered went to the simple girl's heart, and her tears now flowed freely.

"Oh, Mr Vane," she said, "I know you are our best friend. It is for that very reason that I don't like to tell you of my disappointment; but if I do, I am sure you will not misunderstand me."

"I think I see your difficulty," said Vane; "you have been to these people about money. Isn't it so?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then, tell me all about it."

Thus pressed, Mildred found that she had no alternative but to make Vane her confidant, and disclose the nature of her unsuccessful errand.

"Papa," she said, "has very little to live upon, and has had to apply to his lawyers for advances of money, as we are dreadfully in debt. They have been very indulgent to him so far; but now they say, for reasons I need not trouble you with—indeed, I don't quite understand them myself—that they can do no more for him. He owes them a great deal as it is, and—and—"

Here Miss Escombe paused and bit her lips, as

though there were some further trouble behind which she was reluctant to reveal, even to her best friend.

"And what?" asked Vane. "Come, if you tell me part of the story, you must tell me all."

"Well," replied Mildred with an effort, "if certain debts which papa owes are not paid soon, all the little property he has will be sold, and he will be made bankrupt."

Vane was not at all surprised at this disclosure. Indeed, it was exactly what he had anticipated. The man who had not been able to pay his rent for more than a year must, he knew, be in serious difficulties; and anything in the way of monetary trouble might be expected of him.

He was strongly impelled to relieve Miss Escombe's mind at once by assuring her that he would assist her father to any extent. But the prospect of the indefinite burden he might thereby take upon himself deterred him, and told him he must proceed with caution. So he contented himself by saying,—

"I am very sorry to hear this. But I must have a talk over it with your father, and see what can be done."

"Oh! you will not tell him what I have said to you?" cried Mildred.

"Why not?"

Again Miss Escombe cast down her eyes. She could not explain what she well knew to be only too probable, that if Vane once discussed her father's affairs with him, the Major would not be long in giving him a hint—and something more than a hint—that his wealthy landlord might be of a very substantial service to him indeed. As she made no immediate reply, Vane continued,—

"Come, there can really be no reason why I should not ask your papa what I can do for him. Leave it to me, and you will see that all will yet be well."

Then, with his most sympathetic smile, he offered

Mildred his hand, which she took and pressed warmly.

—"How good you are!" she exclaimed. "I could not have thought there was any man so noble, so unselfish, in the world."

After this nothing further was said about the Major's difficulties. Once more Vane turned the conversation, and so they chatted cheerfully till they reached the little house in Deal Street.

CHAPTER VIII.

FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE.

Major Escombe had, as usual, been dozing in his invalid chair, and had resigned himself to his daughter's absence, believing that her errand would detain her for some considerable time. He had just awakened, and glancing at his watch, which rested on a small table by his side, muttered,—

"H'm, four o'clock. She will not be back for an hour yet, at least. Well, well, it can't be helped. I only hope she has succeeded."

And the Major was just composing himself for another nap when, to his great astonishment, he heard the sound of his daughter's knock, and of her voice in the passage below a minute afterwards.

"Returned already!" he exclaimed.

The next moment Mildred entered the room, followed by Albert Vane. Pleased as the Major was to see his daughter back so soon, a slight frown wrinkled his brow as he noticed her companion. Of course, he thought, he could not "talk business" with Mildred in presence of this third party, and he felt a little

annoyed at the chance, as he supposed it to be, which happened to bring them to the door together at the same time. But Mildred at once proceeded to explain matters.

"I am back sooner than you expected, papa, am I not?" she cried, as she slipped off her hat and jacket. "Well, you have to thank Mr Vane for that. Wasn't it curious? He overtook me, in his carriage, in Piccadilly, and was kind enough to drive me to the City and home again."

A discreet mother, with a due sense of *les convenances*, might have been somewhat shocked at this naïve announcement, but Major Escombe could see nothing in his daughter's drive with their young friend except its material advantage in enabling her to perform her errand expeditiously.

"It was fortunate you met, certainly," said he, "and I am much obliged to Mr Vane for his courtesy. I am afraid you must have taken up a good deal of his time."

These last words were spoken with a certain emphasis, and it was obvious to Albert Vane that his host was not disposed to press him to remain. He was prepared for this, so he determined to show at once that he was "master of the situation."

"Not at all, Major," he replied to his host's observation; "I was delighted to do this little service for Miss Escombe. I am always pleased to give a friend a lift, in more than one sense, when I can. I am only sorry that the young lady's errand has not proved successful."

The Major turned his eyes from Vane to his daughter with a look of extreme surprise, not unmingled with annoyance, but before he could speak Mildred interposed.

"Yes, papa," she said, "Mr Vane knows all about it. He was so kind that I could not help telling him the substance, at least, of what Mr Hardcastle said."

"And what did he say?" asked the Major, his anxiety to learn the result of his daughter's mission overcoming even his vexation at her having taken a stranger into her confidence.

"He says he cannot let you have any more money, papa," replied Mildred, "and that the mortgage must be—"

"Foreclosed?" suggested the Major.

"Yes, that is it. I talked to him for a long time, and told him how you were situated—how ill you had been, how people were worrying you for payment and so on—and I begged and entreated him to do a little more. But though he was very polite and nice, he said he really must decline, and at last, as I could not quite understand all his explanations, he promised to write to you and let you know what would have to be done."

"Can't you remember what he said that would be?" asked the Major somewhat testily.

"Well," replied Mildred with hesitation, "it—it was something about going through a court."

"Bankruptcy—disgrace!" exclaimed Major Escombe; "yes, I expected it would come to that at last."

Vane now saw it was time for him to interpose. He had fully settled in his mind the course he should pursue, and was prepared to speak.

"My dear Major," he said, "of course it would be very indelicate on my part thus to stay and listen to the discussion of your affairs, not to speak of my having questioned Miss Escombe already on the subject, if I were not disposed to render you some assistance—"

The Major's countenance brightened as he heard these words, but it fell again as Vane added,—

"Yes, some assistance in the way of advice. I am deeply distressed to hear of your difficulties, especially at a time when you are so little able to attend to business in person. Besides, I would like to spare

Miss Escombe further trouble, if possible, for young ladies are hardly the right persons to deal with affairs of this sort. Now, I give you full liberty to refer your lawyers to me. Tell them I shall be glad to hear from them if they have any proposal to make, and then we will see if we cannot come to some arrangement, which will at any rate give you time to turn round."

This suggestion was rather indefinite, no doubt, but it inspired the Major with hope. If Albert Vane were so well disposed to assist him in the way he had indicated, he might perhaps be induced thereafter to go a step further.

"I am—a—much—a—obliged to you, Mr Vane," said the Major, in a dry and hesitating tone, for the expression of any form of thanks was always a distasteful task to the proud man, "and I feel disposed to accept your offer. These lawyers are little better than tradesmen, and cannot understand the position of a gentleman. Of course I must have more time, for it is time only that I require. Before long no doubt, I shall be able to surmount my difficulties. My wretched health has involved me in expenses which I could not avoid, but when I am fully recovered, as I hope to be in a short time, these of course will be spared. Meanwhile, my creditors must wait — all creditors have to wait—and if you can do anything with these people to bring them to a proper sense of their duty, you will be—a—doing me a service."

"Very well, then," said Vane, "we will see what can be done. I need hardly point out to you, Major Escombe, that my power is limited, but to the full extent of that power I am at your disposal."

"Quite so," replied the Major; "I will write, or get my daughter to write, to Crewe and Hardcastle, and put them in communication with you. Ah! there was a time when I need not have been placed in such a humiliating position. I started in life, sir, with the

most brilliant prospects before me. Young, good-looking—though you might not think it now—full of go and energy, I was perhaps the most promising youngster in my regiment. Dowlas—he is full general now, and a peer—used to say, 'Mark my words, young Escombe will make his way, rise to high rank and distinction.' That's what they used to say of me. And now see me here, a wreck—a comparative wreck. Such is fate and fortune."

Vane was well accustomed to hear the disappointed man bewail his lot in this strain, and, with an inward groan, he reflected that he was destined to be bored for some considerable time with the Major's old grievances; for when the invalid officer was once started on that theme, there was, as the phrase goes, no end to it. The position was the more alarming as the Major seemed to be seeking an excuse to be alone with his victim, when he said to Mildred,—

"Just go down, my child, and make me a little of that mixture—you know what I mean. I feel as though a sip of it would do me good."

"Yes, papa," replied Mildred, "I will not be long."

"Don't hurry yourself," said her father; "Mr Vane, no doubt, will keep me company till your return."

Mildred perceived that the Major wanted to talk with Vane in private, and was nervously apprehensive lest he should trespass further on their good friend's kindness. She had, however, no choice but to obey her father's request, and with a bright and grateful smile and glance directed towards Vane, she left the room.

Vane, thus left alone with the tedious old egotist—how he hated egotists!—thought that he would at least turn the conversation to a subject that interested him, so as soon as Miss Escombe had closed the door behind her, he remarked,—

"What a treasure you have, Major, in such an attentive daughter!"

"Yes, yes," replied the invalid; "Mildred is—a—very useful. She knows my ways well, and is not fussy or forgetful as some women are. It is unfortunate that I never had a son, but still—yes—Mildred is a good girl, a good daughter. She is better than any hired nurse I could engage; but of course, as a girl, she can help me very little in my present embarrassed—temporarily embarrassed—condition. Witness her failure to-day, though no doubt the child did her best. And that brings me to the point. I have already, I think, suitably acknowledged your courteous offer of intervention between myself and my lawyers, and I am sure you will not wish me to say anything further on that subject."

Vane signified assent, wondering what was coming next.

"Meanwhile, Mr Vane, I am really—for the moment only, of course—in very difficult, in fact, I may say, straitened circumstances, and to tell you frankly, as one gentleman to another, a small loan, for a very short time, would be of substantial service to me. I think," added the Major, drawing himself up as stiffly as his recumbent position would allow him to do, "I think I have sufficiently explained myself."

Albert Vane had hardly bargained for so plain a hint that the impecunious Major desired to borrow some ready money of him. He was disgusted at the meanness of the man in thus taking advantage of his good-nature, as he regarded it, and in any other case his course would have been plain before him. He would have refused, or made an excuse equivalent to a refusal. But he could not bring himself to do so with the father of Mildred Escombe. Besides, if the Major were so hard pressed for money, might not his daughter be suffering from the same want of means? And the possibility that Mildred might be denied common necessaries was painful to him. These

thoughts passed rapidly through his mind as he paused to consider his reply; but he felt that he must make a prompt response, as the proud eyes of the old soldier were fixed upon him in evident expectation.

"Certainly, my dear Major," he said, "I should be very happy, if possible, to accomodate you with a loan, but, may I ask, what is the extent of your requirements?"

"I am greatly in want, Mr Vane," replied the Major, "of the sum of—a—fifty pounds."

Vane, reluctant as he was to grant loans in this way, or any other way, saw in a moment that he had no alternative but to accede to his tenant's request. He could not possibly refuse, so he made a virtue of necessity, and responded in his most effusive manner,—

"Nothing, I assure you, will give me greater pleasure than to let you have that sum. I have not the amount upon me, but if you will allow me, I will forward you a cheque to-morrow."

"I am greatly obliged to you, Mr Vane," exclaimed Major Escombe, in a tone more expressive of satisfaction than gratitude. "You will understand, of course, that it is only a temporary loan, which I will undertake to return in—a—a—very shortly."

"Oh, pray take your own time," Vane felt forced to reply. "You shall have a cheque to-morrow."

At this moment Mildred's step was heard on the stairs, and presently that young lady entered, bearing a glass of her father's favourite "mixture," a peculiar compound of lemon juice, syrup, and herbs, with the least drop of brandy, which had been recommended to him as a safe and agreeable beverage for a gouty man.

By this time Albert Vane had had enough of the Major's society, even though he enjoyed the privilege

of sharing it with that of Mildred, so he rose to take his leave.

Miss Escombe accompanied him to the head of the staircase, and pressed his hand with more than usual warmth.

"Oh! Mr Vane," she said, "my heart is too full to express my gratitude for your noble generosity to-day. If you could only know but a little of what I feel, I am sure it would gratify you. No friend, no brother, could have acted more kindly than you have done. God bless you and reward you for it!"

So earnest was her language, so tender was the look with which it was accompanied, that Vane could not resist the impulse to raise the fair girl's soft hand to his lips, and then retain it in his own in a long, close pressure. Their eyes met, and Mildred's face became suffused with a warm blush. It was a moment of danger for Albert Vane, but his self-love, stronger than the love for any woman, came in time to his rescue.

"I am very pleased to have been of some use to you and your father," he said, almost coldly. "Good-bye, I will call again soon."

Dusk was falling, and the street and shop lights were being kindled as Albert Vane drove home. While his carriage bowled along softly and swiftly through the crowded, noisy streets, he reflected on the events of that day and on the possibilities of the future.

"I am fascinated by that girl," he mused. "I never thought it possible that any woman could so twine herself about my heart as she has done. She is surely the sweetest, the most enticing being that ever lived. And how her tender, loving, self-sacrificing nature stands out in bright contrast to that of her miserable, selfish, unfeeling father! I would have liked to refuse him, but it was impossible with the thought of Mildred before me. Now, what am I to do? I know, beyond all doubt, that she loves me,

and that at a word from me she would give herself to me as all my own. Oh! to take her in my arms, to press her to my heart, to rain kisses on her sweet face, and call her my love, my— No! no! Not wife. I cannot marry; I cannot give up this life of freedom, of undisturbed enjoyment—for what? For domestic bliss and domestic troubles, the chain of the marriage tie, the cares of a family, and the sacrifice of independence. What! is all my prudence deserting me? Am I to be caught and caged by the soft snare of a pretty face, and a dainty, tempting form? Nay, it is something more than these, for that girl has a heart and a soul. Have I such possessions? I suppose I have, in common with other human beings; but I must not let them master me. I have reason, too, and my reason tells me that these sentimental impulses are folly, worse than folly. Uncounted millions of men have been carried away by such impulses, often the work of a moment, to be repented of for a lifetime. No, I love her, deeply, tenderly, passionately; but I cannot, I cannot marry her."

By the time that Albert Vane reached his house, his mental excitement had in a great measure subsided. He was once more calm and cool, according to his wont.

"What is the position?" he asked himself, as he sat quietly in a comfortable armchair, enjoying a fragrant cigarette after a dainty dinner. "Major Escombe is poor, my debtor for more than a year's rent; indebted to me also for the services I am about to render him in more ways than one. His talk about repayment, of course, has no more substance than that wreath of smoke; but that matters little. What is to follow? Henceforth he will have a permanent claim upon me; so long, at least, as I have the pleasure of his acquaintance, and will be a constant burthen on my purse. Well, I should not mind even that, for the sake of his sweet daughter. But are matters to

go on in this way? Am I to continue to be only a visitor at their house; a perpetual relieving officer to that tedious and impecunious old gentleman, and get nothing in return? The position is impossible. Yet what am I to do? I cannot break with them, cannot drop them; I cannot shake off the fascination of that charming girl."

Here Vane rose and paced the room for a time in silent thought. Presently an idea seemed to strike him, and he threw away his half-smoked cigarette.

"By heavens!" he exclaimed. "It is a plan worth thinking of. But would they consent to it? Why not? Here they would have comfortable, luxurious quarters. I could provide for the old invalid medical attendance and other necessaries which he could not hope to command elsewhere. His daughter would jump at such a chance for her father's sake. And she? What a delightful housekeeper she would make! How bright, how delicious would be her society! I could even endure the infliction of her tedious old father's company for the sake of enjoying her's at the same time. To bring them here to reside with me in my own house—yes, it would not be a bad scheme, and I think they would accept it. But what then? What is to come of such association between myself and that sweet, innocent girl? Friendship—friendship—nothing more. Yet if anything were to happen to her father while she still remained under my roof—in my care—at my mercy? Oh! why peer so far into the future? Bah! Let the future take care of itself!"

CHAPTER IX.

HIS VERY—VERY SELF.

ALBERT VANE'S perplexities and plans did not disturb his night's rest. He had an enviable capacity for shaking trouble off his mind, and diverting his thoughts from the unpleasant to the agreeable. And he had something very agreeable indeed to think about as he laid his head on the pillow and reflected that on the morrow he should at last be in possession of that much coveted Venetian mirror. So he fell into a calm, dreamless slumber, and his first waking thoughts in the morning were not of the Major and his debts, or even of the Major's fair daughter, but of that bright, resplendent mirror which he hoped to see, before many hours should have passed, suspended in his study.

Vincent had executed the orders given to him with his usual fidelity. Everything was ready for the reception of the mirror, and little more than the turn of a few screws would suffice to fix it in its place in the window-frame.

Vane had finished his breakfast, and his ever-attentive valet stood ready at his elbow to receive his instructions.

"You will see that the greatest care is taken in carrying up the glass," said his master "and that it is put up in the manner I wish."

"I will, sir."

"I don't want to see it, Vincent, until it is in its place, so I shall go down to the club and lunch there, and be back here some time in the afternoon."

"Very well, sir."

"Now, I will go up and dress."

Then, followed by his attendant, Vane proceeded to

his dressing-room, and performed his toilet with even more than ordinary care.

"I must look my best," he laughingly said, "when I come to gaze upon myself—my very self, as old Max says—in the magic mirror."

Accompanied by Vincent, he then descended as far as the first floor, where his study was situated, and entered that apartment. He glanced round its tastefully decorated walls with an air of admiration; he even gazed out of the window, with something like a feeling of satisfaction, at that unsightly scene of poverty and squalor which had so long caused him annoyance.

"I shall soon cease to be troubled by that," he remarked to his valet.

"Yes, sir," replied Vincent; "it is a great eyesore."

Vane then seated himself at his escritoire, and, taking out writing materials and his cheque-book, proceeded first to pen a note to Major Escombe, enclosing the promised cheque for fifty pounds, and informing that impecunious gentleman that he did not require an I O U in return, or even a receipt. His endorsement would be quite sufficient acknowledgment.

"Post this letter, Vincent," he said, "and have it registered."

"I will, sir," replied the valet.

Vane was about to close his desk, when he paused and reflected.

"Why should I do it?" he asked himself. "What folly! Is it possible that I have caught the infection of old Max's superstition? Yet why not now? I shall have to pay him sooner or later, and I may as well do so at once. Of course I do not believe for a moment in this silly story of magic, but I would like to put it to the test without delay. Yes, I will pay for the thing immediately, and so make it entirely my own."

Accordingly he wrote another note, addressed to Reuben Max, saying that he had duly received the mirror, and that he begged to enclose a cheque for fifty pounds, the price stipulated for the precious glass.

"Now, Vincent," he said, handing him this last letter, "as soon as the looking-glass arrives, but not before, despatch this to Mr Max by hand, and instruct the messenger to wait for a receipt. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

Vane could not trust himself to visit the Escombes so soon again. Any further expressions of gratitude on the part of Mildred he felt might, at that moment, move him too deeply, perhaps even shake his resolution. Besides, he wished to remain perfectly calm and cool that day in order to enjoy with undivided thoughts the pleasure of contemplating his new possession.

So he drove down to his club, a very select coterie, renowned for its exquisite *cuisine* and luxurious appointments. It was from this club that he had taken his invaluable Vincent, and no member of it was waited upon with greater zeal than he, for the sufficient reason that he was accustomed to give private "tips" to the servants, in flagrant violation of the rules.

"It may be a little unfair to the other members," he would reflect, "but what of that? The servants will say nothing about it, and, after all, one must make oneself as comfortable as possible."

So the most commodious chair in the reading-room was obsequiously wheeled round for him, and placed in the most convenient light; the best papers were brought to him and deposited at his elbow on a side table, and when the hour for luncheon arrived, the word having gone down to the cook that Mr Vane required his midday meal, his repast was prepared

and served up with, if possible, more than usual care, while the club steward in person saw that his claret was warmed "to a turn," and wholly innocent of any taint from the cork.

Vane was a popular man in his club. Everybody liked him on account of his apparent good-nature and perfect temper. He was as fertile in promises as in excuses when he broke them, and his readiness to acquiesce was generally mistaken for willingness to oblige. He never argued, never contradicted, seemed to have no crotchets, hardly even opinions. He talked briefly and sensibly, and was an attentive listener to conversation that interested him. In short, he was generally pronounced to be one of the most clubable of men.

After luncheon he enjoyed a cigarette or two in the smoking-room, where to two or three acquaintances he disclosed the fact of the interesting acquisition he had just made.

"What!" exclaimed Mr Hawtree, the stockbroker, "has old Max let you have the mirror after all? What did I say? Well, Vane, I suppose you have had to pay him a pretty price for it, eh?"

"No," replied Vane, "only fifty pounds."

"Only fifty pounds?" echoed Hawtree, who could not dispute the statement, though he did not believe it.

"And what about its magical qualities?" asked Mr Bullion, the banker.

"Oh," laughed Vane, "I have not tried them yet. In fact, I have not yet seen the thing; I am going home now to take formal possession of it."

And home he went, in a state of pleasant excitement at the prospect of seeing the magic mirror in in his own house at last. His first word to Vincent, when he entered, was for that intelligent servant as good as a speech.

"Well?"

"It is here, sir," replied the valet, "and is fitted up

in the window of the study according to your orders. The workmen have only just gone."

"Have you sent that letter to Mr Max?"

"It went about an hour ago, sir, just after the glass arrived."

"Has the messenger returned?"

"Not yet, sir."

"That will do, Vincent. I am going up now to see the mirror. Stop! If I ring, come up to me immediately."

"Yes, sir."

It was not without a flutter at the heart that Albert Vane entered his ordinary sitting-room, before proceeding to inspect his new property. Was it only the gentle excitement which he had felt on his way home that caused this thrill of emotion, or some other feeling? If he had cared to ask himself the question, he would have denied that it was anything more than a natural sensation, arising from curiosity to survey his long-desired treasure. He would have scorned the imputation that there was anything of superstition or fear in it. He never believed for an instant that Reuben Max's silly legend contained a grain of truth. The notion was too ridiculous. So people argue sometimes when they enter dark rooms in strange houses; so they scoff at the prejudice against sitting down thirteen to table, or beginning an undertaking on a Friday, and the like. Yet they have a lurking dread of these things all the same.

Again and again Albert Vane repeated to himself the contemptuous phrase, "What nonsense!" as he mounted the staircase to the first floor. Once more he uttered it as he paused at the door, and he was ashamed to feel that his fingers trembled as he turned the handle.

He entered. There was the mirror facing him at the further end of the little room. Vincent had

executed his instructions to the letter. The glass was placed precisely where his master had desired it to be, attached to the window frame, which it fitted exactly, filling up the space to about two-thirds of its height, and leaving above a patch of light, such as one sees in an artist's studio, to illuminate the room. The mirror was well placed. It effectually shut out the sight of that squalid slum, and what Mr Max called "dose boor beoples," the spectacle of whom in their misery need trouble Albert Vane no more. And the strong light from above fell full upon him, rendering his reflection in the perfectly polished glass more distinct than ever he had seen his own image before.

Yes, as he stood there he saw himself indeed—saw himself as he really was. If there were any magic in the glass, there was no sign of it at present. It simply gave back his own form and the surrounding objects within its range accurately and simply like any other well-made mirror. But that the duplication of objects was more than ordinarily vivid, thanks to the peculiar position of the glass, there was nothing remarkable in it whatever.

So there he stood within a pace or two of the polished surface, surveying his comely form. He could not but admire the spectacle thus presented to his sight. He was dressed well, and looked at his very best. His fair hair, which curled naturally over his brow, his fine, expressive blue eyes, his delicate complexion, tinted with the ruddy glow of health, his carefully-trimmed moustache and beard, all were given back in perfect likeness by that truthful yet flattering glass. Thus reflected was his well-proportioned form, broad in the shoulders, narrow in the waist, and spare at the hips. There was duplicated his perfect attire, his artistically-made frock coat, buttoned across the chest, with a neat white flower on the left breast, those trousers without a wrinkle, a triumph of the tailor's art, and the neat

lacquered boots, with their strip of white gaiter, that clothed his small, shapely feet. The reflection was that of a handsome, perfectly well-dressed gentleman, and it was pleasant to look at.

"So," mused Albert Vane, "this is myself, my very —very self, as old Max says. Well, I see it at last in the so-called magic mirror. It shows me nothing that I have not seen before thousands of times. Yet the spectacle is certainly a little suggestive. Myself, my own very—very self. What am I? Surely one of the most fortunate men in the world. I must not tell even myself what this glass tells me touching my personal appearance. I am a presentable person, as the phrase goes, no doubt. What else? My life is one of perfect contentment, and contentment means happiness. I have the means of gratifying my every wish, and I deny myself nothing. I am prudent, and therefore suffer from no excess. I am sufficiently good-natured to please others without injuring my own interests. I never allow my temper to be disturbed, and bear all the little rubs and crosses of life with philosophic calm. I quarrel with none, and envy none. I am without ambition, and therefore free from disappointment. I love, but am resolved that my love shall not deprive me of my liberty. Yes, there I see myself, my very—very self, and—I am perfectly well satisfied with myself."

Smiling with intense gratification at the pleasing picture presented by his reflection, and the equally pleasing thoughts which the sight suggested, Albert Vane took a step backward, the better to view his fair proportions.

What was it that caused him to pause and lift his eyebrows in sudden astonishment? Nothing, simply nothing.

He stood and looked again. There was his reflection as before, gazing at him from the mirror.

Then he took a second step backward. He paused

again, and trembled. What was it that he saw? Himself, only himself. That which he beheld must have been a delusion, a trick of the imagination. It could not be possible.

Once more, for the third time, he stepped backward. O God! It was true!

He staggered against the door, and there he was forced to stop. For a sight met his eye that appalled him.

His reflection in the mirror, instead of receding, had advanced.

Step by step with his own it had come forward. Now it appeared upon the very surface of the mirror like a painted portrait. And now it stepped out of the mirror and stood bodily before him upon the floor.

Bodily! There it stood—a solid, substantial figure. His own features, his own form, clothed in his own attire. His own reflected image come to life! For a few moments Albert Vane remained paralysed, tongue-tied. And there was that awful apparition, smiling his own smile, gracefully bending as he was wont to bend in bowing, and holding forth a hand as though to invite a greeting.

"Who—what—are you?" cried Vane shivering, while the moisture gathered on his brow.

"You — yourself," answered the Apparition, in Vane's own gentlest tone.

"I do not understand—" faltered Vane.

"Possibly not," replied the other; "I must explain matters. I fear I have given you a great shock, and I am truly sorry for it. I can't bear pain myself, and hate to inflict it on others. But, believe me, you will soon get over it when you realise the position. I am simply yourself, that is, your reflection embodied. Do not ask me to tell you how this strange duplication has come about. Perhaps I can hardly account for it myself. Enough that this is really a magic mirror,

and produces, under certain circumstances, the effects you see. But pray don't let it distress you. I wish to cause you as little trouble as possible, and if you submit cheerfully to your new condition, you will, I am sure, have nothing to complain of."

All this was said in Vane's own blandest and most courteous manner—a manner for which he was famous among his friends. Yet it did not please him. By this time he had to some extent recovered his presence of mind, and he now strove to make light of what he regarded as a freak of fancy.

"I presume," he said, with a forced laugh, "that you are what is commonly called a ghost?"

"Something of that sort," replied the other, with a smile.

"Then pardon me," objected Vane, "ghosts do not ordinarily assume a palpable form like yours. They are merely shadows."

"You are quite right," answered the Apparition; "but the fact is, I am not an ordinary ghost. There is a certain novelty in my particular case. I beg your pardon for being so substantial, but really I cannot help it."

"Then if you are a living substance, pray what am I?"

"Oh,—forgive me if my answer appears rude,—you are—nothing."

"Nothing?"

"No; you are only my reflection, my shadow. It is I who am you now."

"This is perfectly incomprehensible. How can I be your shadow?"

"It is difficult to understand at first, I admit, but you will soon be able to grasp the situation. Allow me to explain. While you and I are together, unseen by any third party, we are two persons, two bodies, identical in all respects, but as soon as another eye is present, your body, as it were, becomes merged in

mine; in point of fact, it disappears, although your moral and mental consciousness remains, and you see and hear all that is going on."

"Still," exclaimed Vane, "I do not comprehend what you say, and what is more, I don't believe it!"

"Naturally," replied the other calmly, "it was not to be expected. You can only realise the case by a practical experience. Would you do me the favour to touch the bell?"

Vane approached the wall, pressed his finger on the button of the electric bell as requested, and awaited the result. There was no result. Then he remembered that he had specially instructed Vincent to answer such a summons as soon as it should be given. He had never before known his attentive valet thus to neglect his orders.

"Will you kindly ring again?" said the Apparition, after the lapse of a minute.

Again Vane touched the bell. Still there was no response.

"I think you begin to perceive how matters stand," observed the Apparition. "Allow *me* to try."

He, or it, or whatever the dreadful thing was, walked up to the spot where Vane was standing, and the latter staggered aside in horror.

In a few seconds Vincent made his appearance at the door.

"You rang, sir?" he said, directing his eyes, not at Vane, but at his ghostly Duplicate.

"I did," cried Vane angrily; "I rang twice before. Why did you not come?"

Vincent stood motionless, and made no reply.

"Do you hear me?" shouted Vane. He had never shouted before since he was a boy.

Still Vincent stood patient and silent. Then the Apparition spoke.

"Ah! Vincent," he said, "let me think. What was it

I rang for? Oh! I remember. Has the messenger returned from Mr Max's with the receipt?"

"Yes, sir; here it is," replied the valet, producing a slip of paper.

The Apparition took it and said,—

"Thank you, Vincent. That will do."

"Is the looking-glass to your satisfaction, sir?" asked the valet respectfully.

"Quite, thanks. The work has been done just as I wished."

Then Vincent left the room.

Vane was aghast, and for the moment speechless.

"I think," observed the Apparition, "you understand now the working of the spell, if I may call it so?"

"No," cried the unhappy man, "I am the victim of some horrible dream or some dreadful delusion. I am either sleeping or mad."

"You are neither, I assure you," replied his visitor. "It may, perhaps, be said that you are not quite yourself, and really I do not intend to mock you by saying so. As a matter of fact you are not yourself; but I am. I am now, so far as the eye of the mortal world can see, your own self. I am your Duplicate, or Double, appointed to take your place, to assume your form, your dress, your character. I am conscious of all your past life, and I have to carry on your future life from this moment exactly as you would have carried it on in your own person."

"And I?" cried the wretched Vane; "what am I to do?"

"You? Oh! nothing. You need give yourself no trouble. You have only to follow me and watch me—in point of fact like my shadow, that is, your own—it is all the same,"

"I beg your pardon," exclaimed Vane, "but it is not all the same, by any means."

"Oh! yes, it is. You must excuse me for seeming so rude. I never contradict any one—that is, any one

else. But I assure you it will be all right. Your identity is now merged in mine, and I promise you that I shall never act in any way save as you would have acted; that I shall never offend you or disgrace you by any inconsistency in my conduct relatively to your own. In fact, my actions will be your actions, that is, what would have been yours if we had not had the pleasure of meeting."

"The pleasure!" echoed Vane with a groan.

"And," continued the Apparition, "all you will have to do is to look on, unseen. You ought to find the spectacle both amusing and instructive."

"Ought I?" cried Vane.

The Double took no notice of this derisive remark, but proceeded to say,—

"Now, if you please, will you kindly accompany me? I am about to take a drive."

"No!" ejaculated Vane. I'll be —— if I do."

"Hush!" cried the Double, "I am quite shocked. You—I—we—it is a little embarrassing at first, but we shall soon get used to our twofold identity—never used such strong language before."

"Be that as it may," said Vane firmly, "I refuse to go with you."

"Well, I am truly sorry to say it," replied the Double, "but you have no alternative. Come, follow me."

And the Double, approaching the door, placed one hand on the handle and motioned with the other to Albert Vane.

Some unseen power seemed to compel the unfortunate man to obey, and so the Double passed down the stairs, followed by him who had become the shadow of himself.

"Vincent," said the Apparition, when he had reached the hall below, "the brougham."

"I will send round for it immediately, sir," replied the valet.

CHAPTER X.

MR MAX IS PUZZLED.

WHILE awaiting the arrival of the carriage, Albert Vane's ghostly yet substantial Double strolled carelessly into the morning-room, humming a familiar air, a favourite one with Vane, in Vane's own light-hearted style. He went up to the mirror that hung over the mantelpiece; stroked and smoothed his fair moustache and beard, and stood for a few moments reflecting. His every action, his every movement, his every trick of manner, Vane recognised as his own. It was an odious yet perfect imitation.

Meanwhile Vane stood near his Duplicate too angry to speak. His mind was agitated by bitter, by terrifying thoughts. If this usurper were to carry on his life as he had threatened, and if he himself were forced to stand aside, powerless to check or control the monster, what horrible consequences might not ensue? He dared not picture to himself what the results would be. He felt that he must wait and watch the course of events.

Presently, amidst the silence that prevailed, he was startled by a postman's knock at the street door. A minute or two afterwards Vincent entered bearing a letter on a silver salver, and handed it to his master's Double. Then he retired.

The Double took the letter, turned it over and examined its exterior; then drew from his waistcoat pocket a small, pearl-handled penknife, the exact counterpart of one that Vane habitually used, and was about to cut the envelope.

"Stop!" cried Vane, "I forbid you to open my letters."

"Eh?" exclaimed the Double quietly, looking up

"Oh, you must not mind this. Naturally, in your character, I have to attend, on your behalf, to all your business."

"But I object to your doing so. I will not allow it, and will prevent it."

"Indeed! How?"

The Double fixed his eye on Vane, not menacingly or defiantly, but with a concentration that seemed to deaden his limbs. Vane felt powerless to move: for the moment even speech itself deserted him.

"I fear I distress you," said the Double, "but it cannot be helped. I am really obliged, painful as it is to me, to supplant you in all things, even in such a trifle as this. But I need not say that I have as great a regard for you as I have for myself, so you ought to submit cheerfully to your fate."

Whether cheerfully or not, Vane felt forced to submit. While that hateful Double was calmly opening and perusing his correspondence, he became sensible of a singular change in his condition. He seemed to have altogether lost his bodily substance; his frame had, as it were, melted into air, and though its outward form remained visible to his sight, so far as he could see his own person, it appeared misty or shadowy like that of a ghost. He had no muscular power, no senses but those of vision and hearing, though his faculties of thought and feeling were still alive and acute as usual. It was only at a glance from his other self that his physical sensations were restored. He now perceived that it was utterly useless to attempt to cross any purpose which that awful being might form. It had the power to disembody and neutralise him in a moment.

"The letter is of no consequence," the Double remarked carelessly. "It is only an invitation to dinner from old Borington for to-morrow evening. Of course I shall not accept it. Borington's dinner parties, you know, are so stupid. But he is a good

fellow, and I don't like to offend him. So I shall write and tell him that I have a very particular engagement for to-morrow evening, and therefore regret that I cannot come."

"You mean," cried Vane, "that you will write in *my* name, and tell him what you know to be false?"

"Quite so," coolly answered the Double, placing the letter in his breast-pocket.

Vane reflected that this, indeed, was exactly what he himself would have done under the same circumstances, and he dared not provoke a retort to that effect. So he was silent.

Vincent now entered, and announced that the brougham was at the door. The Double left the room, followed, in spite of himself, by Vane. In the passage the attentive valet made for his master's representative exactly the same careful preparations as he was accustomed to make for his master himself; brushed his hat, laid his gloves out ready for him on the hall table, assisted him to put on his light overcoat, produced a match for his cigarette, and then waited quietly for an indication that his patron desired him to open the street door.

So absorbed was Vane in watching these details, trifling in themselves, yet having now a painful significance, that—a rare occurrence with him—he gave no thought to himself. But he suddenly discovered that by some mysterious agency he had become ready for the promised drive, with hat, overcoat, gloves and cigarette, in precisely the same manner as his Double. A moment's thought told him, of course, that there was nothing to wonder at in this. Given the possibility of such a situation as that in which he found himself, every concomitant phenomenon was equally possible.

Vincent came out as usual to open the carriage door for his master, and the Double stepped into it. As for Vane, he became aware that he too was in the

brougham, though he could not tell how he had entered it. He supposed that for an instant he and the Double must have possessed only one body.

The valet stood at the carriage window awaiting instructions. Then the Double, after a brief reflection, said,—

"Max."

The next moment the brougham was bowling softly and swiftly along the road. Vane sat opposite to his Double, watching him with mingled feelings of hatred and horror, while the latter reclined in that comfortable back seat, smoking his cigarette and glancing over the pages of some illustrated paper as though he were alone.

Meanwhile, Vane once more experienced that strange ethereal feeling which told him that he had been temporarily disembodied. But it was not for long. As soon as the Double fixed his eyes upon him, and appeared to recognise his existence, his physical substance returned.

"Pardon me," said his companion presently, "for taking so little notice of you. I am afraid you must think it very rude of me; but the fact is, it is only by degrees that I can cause you to understand the exact relations between us. It is necessary, therefore, to explain that I have the power of effacing you at any moment; it is a harsh word to use, but really there is no other that can so well express my meaning. I am able to extinguish your presence at will, and you will readily see that you need feel no sense of offence at my doing so, since you and I are practically one individual. As I am yourself, you therefore must consequently be myself; and I need not say that I would not think of doing anything to *you* that could in any way injure or offend *me*. I believe I have made that clear, have I not?"

"Nothing of the sort," retorted Vane; "whatever may be the identity between us physically, it must be

perfectly clear to you, though you choose to ignore the fact, that mentally and morally we are separate individualities, and that your conduct in usurping my place, though it may be satisfactory enough to yourself, is to me a cause of intense annoyance."

"Ah! yes," said the Double, with a gentle sigh, "that is very true. But it is an inevitable condition of our mutual relations. It grieves me to see that I cause you such pain, but it is not my fault, and for my own comfort's sake the best thing I can do is to shut out all thought of you as far as I can; and that is why I use my power to efface you. If you were a lively and agreeable companion, it would be different, but of course that is not to be expected of you—at least at present. So I am sure you will forgive me, if in the meanwhile I rather frequently ignore your existence."

The Double said no more; but, lighting another cigarette, he resumed the perusal of his papers, leaving Albert Vane to his own bitter thoughts. The position was more than mortifying; it was humiliating and shameful to the last degree. That he, who had always regarded himself as the very centre of the world in which he moved; his own interests, purposes, and desires, the most important to him of all earthly considerations; possessed of the means to indulge every wish, every caprice—that he should be thus thrust aside, supplanted, and effaced; robbed of his property, his volition, his very substance and identity, and, as he regarded it, parodied and burlesqued by a supernatural monster, surely his fate was one more hideous than any that the imagination of the fabulist had ever conceived.

Nor was this all. The possibilities of the future suggested by the awful power which this demon in his own shape had alreadydeveloped, were simply appalling to contemplate. What was he likely to do when— But he dared not continue this line of

thought. The prospect was too terrifying for anticipation. Meanwhile he would wait and observe what use the Double proposed to make of his fearful influence.

The one word uttered by his second self to his valet—the name of the dealer Max—had told Vane what was the destination of his present involuntary drive. On reflection he saw that the conduct of the Double was so far consistent enough. If the latter were doing what he himself would have done, nothing was more natural than that he should visit Reuben Max immediately after his acquisition of the magic mirror.

But in what character would he present himself to the dealer? Would he avow the power of the mirror and expose his victim's disgrace, or, if not, would Max discover the secret? Well, time—a few minutes—would show.

Thus they soon arrived at the shop of Reuben Max. The Double alighted and Vane followed, or, to speak more exactly, somehow found himself following him, for his own movements seemed to have become wholly independent of his will. His coachman evidently perceived only one form, and identified it as that of his master. Indeed, by this time Vane had become thoroughly accustomed to what might be called the unification of the two bodies.

The Double entered the shop with Vane's usual quiet, leisurely step, and seemed perfectly familiar with the place and the objects it contained. He accosted Max's shopman with all Vane's easy affability, and on being told that the dealer was in the back warehouse, sauntered thither to seek him.

The old man was busily engaged in dusting with a feather brush some of his most precious curios, and gave a start of surprise when he turned and saw before him the person whom he regarded as Albert Vane. He eyed him keenly, with a look which to any one

else might have been disconcerting, so full was it of curiosity and suspicion. But the Double only met the dealer's glance with Vane's invariable self-possessed smile.

"Ach! Mr Vane, you are here, eh?" said Max. "And how do you vind yourself, my dear sir?"

"Oh, very well, Max, thank you," replied the Double.

"H'm! Just de same as usual, eh?"

"Yes, just the same."

"And de mirror? you have got him—not?"

"Yes, Max, I have got it, and I must say I am greatly pleased with it."

"So you are bleased mid him? Dat is good. But you have not yet seen yourself in him—no?"

"On the contrary, Max. I have taken a very good look at myself in the glass. It showed me off—if I may say so—to great advantage; indeed, I fear I must confess that my reflections, when I came to gaze upon my own features in that polished surface, led me to the conclusion that I ought to be —and was—very well satisfied with myself."

"My own thought!" mused Vane, with a bitter recollection of the last words he had uttered before his terrible transformation.

"So!" exclaimed Reuben Max.

The dealer seemed greatly puzzled and equally disappointed. He looked at the Double again with a searching glance, then cast his eyes to the ground and scratched his head.

"Den," he continued, "I cannot make it out, not at all."

"What can't you make out, my dear Max?" asked the Double.

"He was de man for de mirror," said Max in an absent tone, as though speaking in an aside. "He did see himself—yes—his very, very self in it—and he comes here just de same. Ach! dat is strange."

"Why strange?" inquired his visitor. "Come now, Max, surely you, as a man of the world, as a man of business, don't really and truly believe that that mirror had any magical property? Why, I am surprised at you."

"You may say so, Mr Vane," replied the dealer. "But I don't know. You may be vat you seem to be, or you may not—"

Vane rarely laughed loudly, his utmost expression of merriment took the form of a sort of soft chuckle, and this sound the Double now reproduced exactly. Vane himself shuddered at hearing this echo of his own voice.

"Really, Max," exclaimed the Double, "you are a most extraordinary fellow. What on earth can I seem to be but what I am? Did you expect that this magic mirror would effect any supernatural transformation in my person?"

"I did, and it vould if you vas de man for it," cried the dealer. "But ach! if I have made a misdake!"

"Well, now, tell me, Max," asked the Double, "what was the precise meaning of those words you have so often uttered—'the man for the mirror,' who was 'to see his very—very self' in it. I should like to know, if only to satisfy my curiosity. Come, man, out with the whole story."

"Mr Vane," replied Reuben Max in a solemn tone, "dat is no common glass. It is enchanded. I have it here—de druth about it in dis book.' And the dealer took up the big black-letter folio which he had been studying on the day when Albert Vane last called upon him, and turned over its pages till he came to the passage which he wanted. "Here—here—is de whole story dold. De mirror vas made by Andonio Vicelli at Murano in 1552; and de maderials vas composed by von who vas a great magician. It vas made for a cerdain count, a very rich and very

bad man, who lived only for himself, and cared noding for oder beoples. So de magic of de mirror vorked a spell on him, and ven he did see himself in it, he did see himself indeed. For his revlection came out of it and dook his shape, and he had to vollow it like his own shadow, and mark all vat it did, vile he himself vas unseen of men."

"What an extraordinary state of things!" exclaimed the Double, with a soft laugh. "Well, and what came of it?"

"De revlection of dis man vich had daken his body," continued Max, "and vich carried on his own life, did so many vicked dings dat de boor man vas driven half mad mid grief and horror, for he saw himself now as he really vas, and he knew dat vat de oder von did vas just vat he vas likely to do himself. But he could do noding, he vas helpless as a child."

"Well," asked the Double, appearing to be interested in this strange recital, "and what was the end of it all?"

"Von day de man vas vound dead, stabbed drough de heart. He had left a baper delling de whole story as I dell it to you, and he vinished by saying dat de end of his life vas coming soon, as his torments vas more dan he could bear."

"And is that all?" asked the Double.

"Yes, dat is all. He did not know how de spell could be livted."

"Evidently," said the Double, but he did not seem inclined to ask the meaning of the dealer's last remark.

In Vane's mind, however, that remark excited the keenest curiosity. In what way could the awful spell be lifted? Why did not the Double put the question?

"He might have got himself vree," continued Mr Max, "if he had known all de secret of de mirror Shall I tell you vat dat vas?"

The dealer eyed the Double with a penetrating glance, but the latter with a smile raised his hand and shook his head, saying,—

"Don't trouble yourself, my dear Max, you have told me quite enough already. If I should ever become subject to the spell, I will come and ask you to show me how to get rid of it."

Vane felt sick with disappointment and despair. It was clearly the Double's design that he should not learn that vital secret which would gain him freedom.

"So," continued the Double, after a pause, "in selling me this terrible piece of glass, you thought it would have the same effect upon me as upon that poor devil, Count What's-his-name? That was a very kind and Christian thing to do, wasn't it?"

"Ach! Mr Vane, I thought you vas de man for de mirror—so I did."

"A regular bad lot, eh? Well, I suppose I was not quite bad enough to make the machinery work. Anyhow, I am much obliged to you for your good intentions."

"Yes, I vas wrong, I subbose," said the dealer, "and I beg your bardon, Mr Vane. I hobe you vill bear me no ill-vill for dis."

"Not I, Max," replied the Double lightly. "It was an interesting experiment, I confess, and does equal credit to your common sense and your knowledge of character. But you see even the wisest of us may be mistaken sometimes."

"Yes," assented Reuben Max, "dat is so. But I vas very angry mid you, Mr Vane, for buying me out."

"Then," exclaimed the Double, "in order to serve me out for getting the best of you in that little matter of the Chippendales, you sold me a magic mirror for less than half it was worth. Upon my word, Max, you are even a better man of business than I thought you to be."

"I am at your mercy, Mr Vane," replied the dealer, "and I do not subbose you vill sbare me."

"Don't think that, Max," said the Double. "I am not really so bad a fellow as you fancy. I assure you I bear you no malice for this little trick, especially when it has worked out so greatly to my advantage."

"It is very good of you to say so, Mr Vane."

"Not at all. And now we have had this interesting little explanation, I will wish you good-day."

"Good-day, Mr Vane," responded the dealer, "and dank you very much."

"Don't mention it, Max; only, whenever you have anything else that is both magical and mischievous to sell, don't forget me."

So saying, the Double, with a light laugh, quitted Reuben Max's shop, followed by Vane.

After he had left, the dealer stood reflecting for some time. He seemed profoundly puzzled.

"I cannot make it out, not at all," he said to himself. "He seems de same, and yet I have my doubts. Vy did he not ask me how de spell could be livted? He would do dat if he vas not changed, but he would not if he vas. He would not vant to let de oder von know of it. Neider do I. If he is changed he shall vind it out for himself; berhaps he shall. Dat is just. But I am not sure about it—no, not at all."

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE CLUB.

As the Double entered the carriage once more, Vane heard him direct the coachman to drive to "the club." This undoubtedly was what Vane himself would have

done just then, as his usual dinner hour was approaching, and he often dined at that favourite haunt. Whether the conditions of his new existence would enable him to share a sort of duplicated meal with his companion he could not tell. Certainly he did not look forward to such conviviality with any pleasure. Indeed, he found himself absolutely without appetite, which, under the circumstances, was not surprising.

For some time the Double sat, apparently engaged in thought, and Vane felt that he was being "effaced." This contemptuous indifference on the part of his supplanter galled him cruelly, but it was useless to complain.

At length the Double deigned to acknowledge his presence.

"That was an interesting interview, was it not?" he inquired.

"If you ask me," replied Vane, "I regarded it as simply disgusting."

"Indeed! why so?"

"Apart from my own odious position, of which, of course, it is needless to speak, as you seem utterly insensible to it—"

"I beg your pardon, I am fully alive to its unpleasant nature, so far as you are concerned; but what can I do?"

"Apart from that, I say, my sense of honour was outraged by listening to the series of barefaced falsehoods with which you deceived Reuben Max."

"Falsehoods!" exclaimed the Double, "no, no, you must not say that; I cannot allow you so to slander yourself."

"Myself? What had I to do with it? I was merely a passive spectator and listener. It was you who forged these monstrous lies."

"I beg your pardon, no lies were told. You do not even yet seem to appreciate the position. I wonder

that a man of your singular acuteness does not see that all I said to Max was perfectly consistent with truth. I was conversing with him in your person, your character, and I simply dealt with him exactly as you would have done, but for the accident that has brought us together. Supposing that nothing had come of your acquisition of the mirror, and that you had found it perfectly harmless, surely your language and demeanour towards that credulous old gentleman would have been identical with my own just now."

"But you, in your capacity as a spirit, a ghost, or whatever you may be," retorted Vane, "knew the truth, and therefore your denial of the magical effects of the mirror was a tissue of falsehoods."

"Ah!" said the Double, "there we enter into nice subtleties and distinctions which can only lead us into confusion. No, for all practical purposes we are one person; one body, if not exactly one soul, and, so far as the mortal world is concerned, it is you who are speaking and acting, not I, whatever, as you so politely put it, I may be. And this brings me to a point which it is necessary for me to impress upon you. You spoke of me as a spirit, a ghost, just now. Oh! I don't resent it in the least, I am not at all offended."

"It would make no difference to me if you were," muttered Vane.

"Just so. Well, as a matter of fact, you are mistaken; it is you who are the ghost now: I am the substance, and I am afraid that you will have to reconcile yourself to this state of things in many ways."

"How do you mean?"

"For example, I am going down to the club to have my dinner. No doubt it will be an excellent one, and I shall enjoy it. For that I have to thank your admirable taste, and your forethought in 'squaring' the club servants. During the meal, and all future meals, I shall take the liberty to efface you. You

will be present and watch my proceedings, but you will not require to share the meal: being a ghost, of course you are in no need of mortal food."

"Then how am I to live?"

"You cannot exactly be said to live at all: you exist. You are not a person, but a being, and you are relieved of all bodily pains and needs, and therefore of the necessity for human sustenance. You are, in fact, henceforth pure mind and soul. Really, you ought to be proud of your condition."

"Great Heavens!" Vane burst out in an agony of despair, "how long is this torment to last?"

"Don't call it torment," replied the Double; "believe me, you will get quite accustomed to it in time, and, I hope, you have plenty of time before you; for our association, if I may call it so, will continue as long as I live."

"But Max said that there was a means by which this spell could be lifted—that there was a secret of the mirror which its first victim did not know. Why did you not ask him what that secret was?"

"Why?" echoed the Double smiling; "because I know it already."

"What is the secret?"

"Ah! there you ask too much. Surely you cannot expect me to tell it you."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Do you think I would wish to put it in your power to drive me away, to banish me from this pleasant earth, with all its delights, which I hope to enjoy in your society?"

"But do you take no thought of my position? Do you not see that what may be pleasure to you is torture, worse than death, to me?"

"Certainly, and it grieves me. But what can I do? My own interests and comfort are my first consideration; it was always so with yourself. You would have done precisely the same in my place."

"Then do you mean to tell me that I can never get rid of you?"

"I do not say that."

"You are incomprehensible."

"I am afraid that I appear so sometimes; but a little reflection will soon make matters clear to you. I said that our association would continue so long as I live."

"Then you are liable to die?"

"Yes, as a man."

"By what means?"

"By any means that can extinguish mortal life. By a bare bodkin, for example, as Hamlet says."

Albert Vane reflected for a moment, while the Double stood patiently awaiting the development of the process of reasoning which was at work in his mind.

"Was that the case," Vane asked, "with the being who took the form of that man—that count—of whom Reuben Max has spoken?"

"Certainly."

"How did that creature die?"

"The count, driven to desperation by circumstances with which I will not trouble you—the story is too painful—destroyed his counterpart."

"Destroyed him!" echoed Vane, his heart leaping at the hope these words suggested. "Do you mean to tell me that I, too, have the power to slay you?"

"Beyond doubt."

"Then what is to prevent my doing so? It would not be murder, for you are no human creature."

"You are perfectly right."

"But ah! you would not permit it. At the moment when I sought to free myself from your hated influence, you would paralyse my arm and render me powerless."

"Not at all. I would submit cheerfully to your will. Yes, you can kill me whenever you please—stab me, shoot me—I will not go into all the un-

pleasant details. It is a matter of indifference to me whether I live or die—as a mortal."

"And what would be the result to me?"

"To you? Oh, I wonder that your great intelligence does not suggest the inference. If you slay me, you, of course, at once put an end to your own existence."

"Why of course?"

"Are you not my reflection, my shadow? When the substance expires, necessarily the shadow must expire also."

"Therefore my act in slaying you would be practically an act of suicide?"

"You have exactly hit the mark."

The position was now absolutely clear to the wretched man.

"Then," he groaned, "we are united till death?"

"It would seem so," replied the Double; "unless you find out how to lift the spell."

Albert Vane's other self made no further remark, and appeared to efface him once more, for there was silence between the substance and the shadow till they arrived at the club.

Here the proceedings of the Double were, as Vane could not but observe, precisely of the same character as his own had been in the past. He strolled into the house with Vane's usual leisurely step, asked for letters at the lodge,—there happened to be none just then,—was received with the same obsequious civility by the servants as they had been accustomed to show to Vane himself, and was greeted now and then with a nod or a shake of the hand by other members who seemed to recognise him as a familiar acquaintance.

These evidences of the complete transfer of his identity caused Albert Vane a bitter pang. He had begun to fancy that, after all, there was some difference between the outward aspect, as well as the character, of the Double and his own. The creature

was hateful in his sight; he regarded him not only as heartless, selfish, and detestably cruel, but even vulgar and ugly in appearance. It is a way we all have of looking upon our enemies. Hatred has a wonderful power of distorting the mental vision, and our imagination paints those we dislike in the darkest colours.

"Is it possible," he reflected, "that this abominable monster can really resemble myself, or is it only a stupid want of discrimination that leads other people —misled by a superficial and partial likeness—to mistake him for me?"

Whatever the truth might have been, certain it was that no doubt or suspicion of his identity seemed to cross the mind of any of those who encountered the Double as he made his way into the inner recesses of the club. He strolled into the dining-room; gave orders for his dinner to the steward, selecting the same sort of dishes, the same sort of wine, that Vane preferred. Then he sauntered into the reading-room, and made himself comfortable in an armchair, glancing through the pages of books, papers, and magazines—Vane was never what is called a reading man, he only skimmed lightly over the literature of the day—until he should be informed that his meal was served.

In due course a waiter entered and made this welcome announcement—welcome, at least, to Vane's counterpart, for he exclaimed,—

"Ah! I shall eat with a good appetite, for I have done a very fair day's work."

Though relieved of any mortal sense of hunger, Vane looked on at the Double's enjoyment of his dinner with feelings of envy not unmingled with disgust.

"What an odious glutton it is!" he said to himself; "the creature's soul seems entirely absorbed by animal appetite."

Herein he did injustice to the Double, for he was only a little more attentive to his own creature comforts than Vane usually was himself, a fact to be accounted for by the stimulating effect of that day's successes. For had he not gained the great object of his—that is, Vane's—desire, the Venetian mirror, and had he not the satisfaction of remembering how he had outwitted poor Reuben Max?

When he had finished his repast, the Double strolled into the smoking-room, where several other members were already assembled. There were Hawtree the stockbroker, his little crony Titkins, Bullion the banker, and others.

"What, Vane!" exclaimed Hawtree. "You are still alive, eh? Why, we all thought you would have been annihilated by this time."

"Indeed!" said the Double, helping himself to a cigarette; "why so?"

"Why, are you not now the possessor of that famous mirror, and has it not some magical property which was to frighten you out of your wits, or cheat you out of your body, or something of that sort?"

"Yes," replied the Double quietly, "I have got the glass now, and a very pretty piece of furniture it is. As for the magic—well, I have not seen much of it yet. Perhaps it is to come."

"It is a very curious thing," Mr Titkins ventured to remark, "this belief in supernatural or non-natural manifestations. Of course I have no faith in them myself, but it is surprising how many really sensible—indeed, I may say very clever—people believe in spirits."

"I do, for one," cried Mr Grogberry, a burly, red-nosed, country squire. "Waiter, a whisky and appollinaris."

"That's not what I mean," said Mr Titkins quite seriously, whereat everybody laughed. "This very

wide-spread belief in ghostly appearances, messages from the other world, and so on, is really most remarkable. I wonder, now, whether there is anything—"

"Rubbish!" cried Mr Hawtree, with his most superior air. "The human race have at all times been given to these superstitions, the wisest as well as the most ignorant, and so it will be, I suppose, to the end of time. And there is good reason for it. It is capital business; no better way of extracting money out of the pockets of fools."

"Well, that has not been the case with our friend Vane, at any rate," remarked Mr Bullion, "for I understand that he got this magic mirror remarkably cheap. Wasn't it so, Vane?"

"Yes," replied the Double quietly, "I think it was a bargain."

"How did you manage it?" asked Hawtree. "It is not everybody who gets the best of old Max."

The Double looked greatly flattered.

"No, I suppose not," he said, with a simper.

"What a sly dog you are!" cried one of his friends. "For all your affected indifference and carelessness, I believe you are about the sharpest fellow out where your own interests are concerned."

This was a character which Vane was always delighted to hear imputed to him, but he began to see it in a somewhat different light now.

"The creature," he reflected, "is taking credit for very little. If Max fell into a trap it was one of his own making, not mine. Surely I would never have been such a humbug, such an impostor, as to pretend to superior astuteness in a case like this."

The interest felt in the subject of Albert Vane and his new acquisition was soon exhausted, and the conversation turned to other topics.

At last, to Vane's great relief, the Double rose to depart. It was his own custom, as he sadly re-

membered, to leave the club about that time and seek some amusement for the evening. He had formed no particular plan for that night, and he wondered what the Double would do.

He was not long left in ignorance. The ever-ready brougham was soon brought to the club door, and the Double, stepping into it, ordered the coachman to drive "home."

A dreadful apprehension had presented itself to Vane's mind, but this evidence of the Double's intention to pass the evening in his own house—for, hateful as the expression was, Vane felt compelled thus to speak of the monster's dwelling—brought him some relief for the time.

On the way to Bayswater, Vane found himself absolutely "effaced." The Double ignored his presence, and smoked his cigarette in silence.

"What is he thinking about?" mused Vane, with a beating heart.

Nor during the remainder of the evening did the Double call his victim into existence for purposes of conversation. He spent the time alone in his study, with an open book before him, which he seemed only to affect to read. It was evident that his thoughts were elsewhere. Where?

Vane shuddered as he asked himself the question.

Shortly before midnight, and after a light and delicate supper, the Double retired to rest. Vane generally kept early hours.

As he entered his bedroom the unfortunate man heard his Duplicate give utterance to a sound that moved him more than any speech which had hitherto emanated from the creature's lips.

Yet it was only a sigh.

Then the Double went to bed, and Vane's consciousness was extinguished for the night.

CHAPTER XII.

ON DELICATE GROUND.

It was not till he found himself in presence of his other self in the breakfast-room that Albert Vane became once more alive to the hard realities of the world. It could not be said that he had enjoyed a night's repose, yet the result seemed the same. He was attired in his usual easy, morning costume, identical in every particular with that which clothed the form of his Double, who sat there at the breakfast-table, carelessly glancing through the columns of a daily paper, and for the moment heedless of Vane's presence.

Vane did not wonder at the mysterious influence which had thus, as it were, extinguished him during the night and had restored him to animation in the morning. He was fast becoming accustomed to his fate, if not yet reconciled to it, and no new phenomenon in his experience would have surprised him. But not the less acute was his sense of shame and resentment at the hard and humiliating lot which had reduced him to be the ghost or shadow of the being who had assumed his shape. He felt a profound contempt for this self-indulgent, self-absorbed egotist, and could not yet bring himself to believe that, however closely the Double might resemble him in outward appearance, the moral characters of the supplanter and the supplanted were the same.

"Great Heaven!" he cried within his mind, as he watched his apathetic tormentor sitting calmly disregarding his presence. "What an ignoble creature I must have been if I resembled a thing like that! Yet no, it could not be."

After a while the Double condescended to notice him.

"Good morning," he said with cheery affability, as though addressing an ordinary acquaintance; "I need not ask you if you have slept well, as you of course do not sleep. You are exempt now from the unpleasantness of a restless night, and from those stupid dreams or horrid nightmares that disturb repose. Still, I may ask whether you are satisfied with the arrangement by which you are relieved of your consciousness for a time?"

"I am satisfied with nothing in my condition," replied Vane bitterly; "I simply submit to my fate like a slave."

"I am sorry to hear you talk so gloomily," said the Double, in what seemed to be a sympathetic tone, "but I hope you will be more cheerful soon. There is no one I like so well in the world as you, and I wish to be your best friend. No doubt we shall get on better in time. Meanwhile I must ask you to pardon me if I do not seek your society more than I can help. And if your temporary extinction at night is not quite satisfactory to you, I am sure you will be pleased to know that I find it a great relief, as naturally it would be very disagreeable to me to reflect that there was a sort of discontented ghost prowling about the premises while I was sleeping, and that it might perhaps alarm me by presenting itself suddenly in my bedroom during a wakeful moment. Besides, I don't think you would like it yourself."

This was said in no mocking or bantering tone, but apparently with all sincerity. It implied, however, a brutal callousness that disgusted Vane intensely.

"I have nothing to say about it," he remarked. "I am wholly in your power; I would say at your mercy, but apparently you have none."

"You are unjust," said the Double, "but we will not argue the question. I dislike controversy of any sort."

While the Double was enjoying his breakfast, Vane, of course, remained in a state of effacement. Vincent waited upon his master's counterpart with all his usual skill and attention, and when the meal was disposed of he duly produced the morning's correspondence, on this occasion limited to a single letter.

"You will excuse me," said the Double courteously, when the valet had left the room, as he proceeded to open the letter addressed to Vane.

The latter gave an inward groan of disgust and despair. It was useless to protest against this tampering with his correspondence. However, he said,—

"If you take the liberty of reading my letters, at least you might have the common courtesy to acquaint me with their contents."

"Certainly," replied the Double with alacrity. "Believe me, I never thought of doing otherwise. Indeed you can read this letter and all others yourself if you please."

"Who is the writer?" asked Vane in a sulky tone, awaiting the answer with a certain feeling of nervousness.

"Writers," replied the Double; "it is from the firm of Crewe and Hardcastle, solicitors, stating that Major Escombe has given them the name of his friend Albert Vane as a reference in respect to certain debts of his, and asking what that gentleman proposes to do in the matter."

"I do not see how that concerns you," said Vane, in a trembling voice.

"Pardon me," responded the Double; "everything that concerns you concerns me, and this, of course, among the rest."

"Well," cried Vane in desperation, "and what do you propose to do?"

"Oh! I need hardly say that I shall duly carry out your own kind intentions. You were disposed to assist the impecunious Major—so am I. Naturally

I want first to ascertain the full extent of his obligations, as I do not wish to commit myself indefinitely on his behalf. But I am anxious to do the best I can for the unfortunate man, for the sake of—"

Here he paused and breathed a sigh. Ah! it had come at last—that which Albert Vane had dreaded most — the first cruel evidence that his supplanter shared his sentiments on a subject which had been nearer to his heart than all else in the world—except his own comfort and happiness. It was with a bitter pang of self-reproach that that last consideration occurred to him. But he was eagerly watching for any possible development of that feeling on the part of his other self.

"Yes," continued the Double, "for the sake of dear, sweet Mildred I would make a considerable sacrifice. I would not even mind becoming responsible for her father's debts—if they have not yet run up to a very formidable figure."

"Do you mean to say," Vane burst out, with a fury of indignation quite unexampled in his previous life, "that you presume to think of Miss Escombe with the same thoughts that have occupied my mind?"

"Oh, yes!" replied the Double calmly, "my feelings and yours are identical. I carry on your life in this as in all other respects. Believe me, I am in no way untrue to your love for Miss Escombe."

"Cruel monster! Accursed tormentor!" cried Vane. "This must not be."

"I beg pardon," answered the Double, "but it must, very much indeed. There is no interest in your life that I feel more bound to cultivate than this."

"Nay," exclaimed Vane, "in that matter you shall not go a step further."

"Indeed? What is to prevent me?"

"What? Have you forgotten? Do you not remember that you have told me I have the power to destroy you?"

"Certainly you can destroy me; that is, you can destroy yourself in my person. But what of that?"

"I will do it. I will end your hated existence and my own rather than—"

He paused, for he was not indeed prepared to point to any special contingency as urgently demanding his threatened interposition. So the Double took up his broken utterance.

"Rather than what?" he asked. "What is it that you intend—that you would take such an extreme step—to prevent?"

"Your—your—association with Miss Escombe," faltered Vane.

"Is that all?" asked the Double. "Surely that hardly justifies such a violent proceeding as you contemplate. I admit that it must be unpleasant for you to see me in Miss Escombe's company and to be conscious of the feeling which I entertain towards her. But you know that can't be helped. For the rest I really see nothing for you to be anxious about. Think. What was the state of your mind with regard to this dear young lady at the moment before we first met? You loved her, but resolved not to marry her. That is exactly *my* present state of mind. There has been no change since then, I assure you."

"But what—what do you intend?" asked Vane, with an alarming recollection of a further design which had suggested itself to him.

"What do I intend?" repeated the Double. "I am sure I don't know. Certainly I intend no harm. What I may do hereafter I leave to the future, and I am still of the opinion that it is best to leave the future to take care of itself. In the meanwhile, Miss Escombe's society is very delightful, and I think—yes, I think I shall continue to cultivate it."

There was a pause in the conversation, and Vane reflected. Agonising as the thought was that this

horrid demon in his shape seemed destined to supplant him in the admiration, aye, and the affection of Mildred Escombe, Vane could not but take some comfort in the recollection that he had formed no definite plans with respect to her. True, he had contemplated a proposal that she and her father should come and reside in his house; but this proposal had not yet been made, and if it were made, might not be accepted, while possibly the Double might abandon it, as he himself might have done.

Then again—it was a faint hope, but he clung to it nevertheless—might not Mildred, with her delicate womanly instinct, perceive some difference between the hateful being who was personating him and himself? Her fine nature, and the tender regard which he believed she felt for him, might prompt her to discern something suspicious and repellant in this monster which ordinary eyes could not detect. From the depths of his heart he prayed that it might be so.

He had no opportunity, even if he had the desire, to sound the Double further on this subject, as the latter presently touched the bell and Vincent entered.

"Well, Vincent," he inquired, as Vane often did, "have you any news?"

"No, sir," replied the valet. "None; that is, nothing very particular."

"Ah!" said the Double. "Then I think I will go up to dress."

"I beg pardon, sir," observed Vincent, with an air of hesitation, "but there is something which, perhaps, I ought not to trouble you about."

"Indeed!" said the Double. "What is it?"

"Well, sir, the fact is, I have heard something of your former man, Baldwin."

"Ah! Yes! Poor Baldwin! Where is he now?" asked the Double, but without any show of eager interest.

Vane, on the other hand, listened with intense attention; somehow, perhaps through the influence of misfortune, he had begun to feel a little more sympathetic to the woes of others.

"I am sorry to tell you, sir," answered the valet, "that he is very ill and in great want. He is living in a poor lodging—I have got the address—and he is paralysed all down one side. They say he can't stop where he is much longer, and will have to go to the workhouse hospital."

"Really? You don't say so," remarked the Double with some feeling, but not much. "Poor fellow! I am very sorry to hear this. And has he no friends?"

"None that could be of any use to him, they say, sir."

"Ah! It is shocking, very shocking, I almost wish you had not told me this, Vincent. It has quite upset me. Poor Baldwin! He was an excellent servant, and I could not pay you a greater compliment than by saying that you are almost as useful as he was, if not quite."

"It is very good of you, sir, to say that."

"Not at all. And now, Vincent, I will go up and dress."

Vane, in following his impersonator, had, of course, no chance of addressing him, as the valet was present. But he was deeply pained by what he had just heard, and filled with disgust at the very inadequate show of sympathy which the Double had displayed on behalf of his old and faithful servant, now so terribly afflicted. Nor could he resist the accusations of his own awakened conscience. If the Double were thus callous to the distress of poor Baldwin, had not he himself been equally indifferent, and was not his Duplicate acting consistently in continuing the same line of feeling? He could not deny it.

But surely he was not utterly stony-hearted. Surely he would have been moved by this sad story to do something, at least, for the benefit of that poor

fellow. And surely the Double would render justice to his better nature in this respect.

The Double dressed with all Vane's usual care, and then entered the study, dismissing Vincent with instructions to order the carriage. Vane again found himself dressed precisely in the same manner as his counterpart, though he had been unconscious of any process of change.

The Double stood for some minutes occupied in thought, and surveying his comely form in the Venetian mirror—that fatal mirror!—in which Vane perceived that only a single figure was reflected. Whether it was himself or the Double, or both in one, he could not tell.

His other self did not leave him long effaced, for presently he observed,—

"Yes; I must do something for Baldwin."

"I am glad to hear you say that," remarked Vane. "Those are the first words that have fallen from your lips which have given me any satisfaction."

"Naturally," said the Double; "I am only representing you in the matter. You would certainly have done the same."

"Most certainly," exclaimed Vane with earnestness; "I would have behaved, and wish you to behave, liberally, generously, to him."

"Yes, yes," replied the Double, "that is all very well. But what is called generosity often is only another name for lavishness and extravagance. I cannot be expected to keep a disabled servant, however good he may have been. Still, I intend to do something for him. H'm, now what shall it be?"

As he uttered these words, the Double seated himself at Vane's escritoire, drew forth a bunch of keys, and opened a drawer, whence he produced Vane's chequebook.

Although Vane was now fully conscious of his onw helpless position, he could not but be startled by this cool proceeding.

"Do you mean," he asked, "to forge my name?"

"Eh?" cried the Double, looking round. "Forge? Oh, no, it is not forgery. In signing your name I simply sign my own in your handwriting. It is all the same."

Vane, of course, felt it would be idle to expostulate. He only hoped that if the Double were about to make out a cheque in favour of Baldwin, it would be for a very substantial amount.

"Yes," repeated the Double, in a pensive tone. "What shall it be?"

"I would make him a handsome allowance for his life," cried Vane.

"What?" exclaimed the Double, again turning round. "A handsome allowance for life? Surely you must be joking. No, no, it is not to be thought of for a moment."

"Then do I understand," asked the wretched man, "that I have no voice whatever in the disposal of my own property?"

"Voice? Oh, yes, you have a voice," replied the Double, "but I am sorry to say you have no power. There, leave it to me. I assure you I will do exactly what you would have done under the circumstances."

"And what is that?" asked Vane.

"Why, I will send him—yes—I will send him—a couple of pounds."

"Two pounds!" cried Vane. "Ah! for his present necessities. Yes, that will be enough, no doubt. Then you will instruct Vincent to inquire a little later how he is getting on, and give him further relief if he requires it. That is what you mean, is it not?"

"Not at all," replied the Double. "I think two pounds quite sufficient under the circumstances; it ought to last him—oh, a long time. Indeed, I should fancy, from what Vincent says, that the poor fellow cannot have many weeks to live."

"Man," cried Vane—"if man you be—do not be so

hard. You assume to be my counterpart, my representative; you pretend that your feelings are my feelings, your actions my actions. Be it so. I agree and submit. Act for me if you will, if you must, but act as I would do—"

"As you *would have done*," interrupted the Double, with a certain polite emphasis. "Pardon me for correcting you—that is all I can do."

"But believe me, I would not have left my poor old servant to perish in want. I would not have mocked his misery with so paltry a gift as that which you propose."

"Ah, you think so now. But would you have done more if a certain little accident had not happened? I believe not. No, two pounds is quite enough."

So saying, the Double proceeded deliberately to make out a cheque for the amount he had named, and signed it in Vane's name, in Vane's own neat handwriting. Then placing it in an envelope, which he fastened down, he rose and touched the electric bell.

"Vincent," he said, when the valet appeared, "take this. It is a present for poor Baldwin. Go and give it to him, with my regrets, and best wishes for his recovery."

"I will, sir," replied the valet; "and, please sir, may I say that I think it is very good of you?"

"You may, if you like," replied the Double smiling; "but it is unnecessary. One must do something for an old servant in trouble. I would do the same for you, Vincent."

"Thank you, sir; you are very kind."

"And—a—Vincent. I have done quite as much now for poor Baldwin as I feel justified in doing, and I hope I shall not hear again that he is in distress. It is very painful to me. You understand?"

"Quite, sir," replied the intelligent valet, and then he retired.

"Well," cried Vane, when at last he found that he

was free to speak, "at least I am not so utterly heartless as this!"

No," observed the Double quietly, "I suppose not. But, as I said once before, you are not yourself now, and—I am."

CHAPTER XIII.

ANOTHER DRIVE TO THE CITY.

ONCE more seated in his carriage with his other self, it was with mingled feelings that Vane had become aware that their destination was the house where Major Escombe and his daughter resided. The Double was about to visit them—for what purpose? He had said nothing to Vane on the subject; indeed, he did not seem in a mood to converse with him, but sat silent throughout the drive, absorbed in meditation. Vane had no power to fathom his counterpart's thoughts, and his own were terribly agitated and perplexed. He had on his conscience that half-formed plan of his, and he wondered whether the Double designed to carry it out. If he did, what hideous possibilities might not come of it?

And Mildred? How would she receive him? What would be her demeanour at the first sight of the unearthly being that had assumed his shape? More than ever he felt convinced that he and his Double were unlike, in spirit if not in substance, and that the eye of affection must discern the difference between them. Alas! in his altered state of feeling Albert Vane lost sight of the fact that the Double appeared simply as he himself seemed only a day or two ago, and that Mildred had seen no fault in him. To her he was ever the kindest, the most generous of men. She

did not know him as he really was; she could not know him as he was beginning to know himself. It was idle for him to hope that she would see what he saw now, and yet he hoped, for all that.

Whatever expectations he may have entertained in this direction were cruelly dispelled as soon as his counterpart came face to face with the woman he loved.

"Oh! Mr Vane," cried Mildred, as the Double, followed by Vane, entered the familiar room on the first floor of the little house in Deal Street, where the invalid father and his daughter were found together, as usual, "I am so glad to see you; I declare I was getting quite anxious about you."

"Well," replied the Double, smiling, "I hope you have had no cause. But are you quite sure? Come, take a good look at me. Am I really the same person whom you knew before I gazed into the magic mirror?"

It was a critical moment, and Vane, but for the suspension of his bodily sensations, might have been said to hold his breath as he awaited Mildred's answer.

She did indeed look at the Double, keenly, earnestly. It was but for a moment, yet that quick, eager glance was enough. She had no doubt, she saw no change, and Vane's last hope vanished.

"Why, of course you are the same," she said laughing, and with a pretty blush; "how foolish it was of me to be afraid!"

"Were you?"

"Oh! it was very silly. I actually dreamt about you at night, imagining all sorts of horrors and impossibilities. I fancied you were transformed into some horrid monster, and then I thought I was a fairy, and had power to disenchant you."

"And did you?"

"No, I hadn't time, for I was so frightened that I woke up."

"Well," said the Double, "it is pleasant to know

that you felt so much interest in my welfare. Yes, I have got the magic mirror, but nothing particular has come of it."

Major Escombe listened to this conversation with some impatience, as he usually did when the subject did not directly concern himself. But he now saw an opportunity of joining in it.

"The belief in magic mirrors and stuff of that sort," said he, "is very common in the East. I remember a very remarkable story which was told me once by the British Resident in Juggerbad about a Brahmin who had a looking-glass in which all who gazed into it could see the future of their lives. An English officer came to the fellow's temple one day, and asked to have a peep into the glass, believing, of course, that it was all humbug, and to his horror saw the likeness of a man being torn to pieces by a tiger. The oddest part of the business was, that about a year afterwards, that was just how he died. He was out hunting tiger in the jungle; he fired at one of the brutes, and slightly wounded it, and before any one could interfere, the beast was upon him and crushed the life out of him."

"Oh, papa!" cried Mildred, "what an awful story! Do you think it was true?"

"I don't know, I am sure," replied the Major; "I tell it as it was told to me; I was not there myself at the time."

"These tales are very absurd," said the Double; "but if you were to relate this one to my friend Max, he would believe every word of it, and would give you a big price for the mirror itself, if you happened to have it."

"I wish I had such a thing, then," observed the Major laughing.

It was evident that Major Escombe was in much better health and spirits than he had enjoyed for some time. He was as loquacious as usual, but more

lively, and in the course of the conversation that followed he showed himself more cordial in his manner towards the Double than ever he had been to Vane. Nor was the reason of this change of demeanour far to seek. It was certainly not gratitude for that loan of fifty pounds, though the Major was still deriving advantages in more ways than one from that timely accommodation. He was still in possession of the greater part of the amount, and ready money always did him more good than physic —so, at least, he was accustomed to say. The true cause of his genial reception of the Double was Vane's promise of interposition with the solicitors, a promise which opened up to the impecunious gentleman the brightest of prospects.

"Well," he said, "have you seen those lawyer fellows, and is the matter settled?"

"Why, no," replied the Double, "I cannot say the matter is exactly settled. I have heard from Crewe and Hardcastle. They have written to me asking what I propose."

"H'm! ah!" said the Major, a little awkwardly; "and what do you propose?"

"That," answered the Double, "is what I have come to talk about. I am very pleased to see you so much better, as now I daresay you will not mind going into this little matter of business."

Strange to say, at hearing these words the Major did not look so well as he had appeared at first. His countenance fell, and he uttered a groan as though suffering acute pain.

"I haven't got rid of that confounded gout yet," he exclaimed; "that was an awful twinge. The least thing brings it on, and nothing is worse for me than worry and anxiety of mind. If you will excuse me, Vane, I think we will not talk about business just now."

"As you please, Major," replied the Double; "let

us then talk of something else. By the way, what do you think of the latest news from the East? That rising on the frontier seems likely to be a troublesome affair, eh?"

For some reason it was evident to Vane that the Double desired to make the Major talk. He himself had done the same before, when he wished to remain silent and think sweet thoughts of Mildred in her presence. She herself sat there by her father's side, engaged in some bit of needlework, listening silently to the conversation, and casting upon the Double, now and then, glances which caused Vane's soul to burn with jealousy and rage.

While the Major prosed away about the frontier difficulty, pompously laying down the law on the subject, saying how he would act in the emergency, and boasting of his own past achievements, the Double seemed to listen with interest, but was evidently engaged in thought on some very different subject. What the nature of his cogitations might be Vane could not divine, but the whole position filled him as much with anxiety as with anger.

At length, when the Major had fairly exhausted the topic he was so eloquently dilating upon, and in some measure his own powers of utterance, the Double said,—

"I am much obliged to you, Major. It is really most interesting and instructive to hear such well-informed and enlightened views on a matter of so much importance. I see you are tired, so I will not trouble you about anything else. Still, that little matter of business we spoke of just now must be attended to. Oh, don't be afraid, Major, I am not going to ask you to discuss it. I was only thinking that as I must go and see your lawyers about it, and am so imperfectly acquainted with your affairs, it would greatly facilitate matters if I had Miss Escombe's assistance."

Mildred looked up in surprise at hearing herself thus referred to, and exclaimed,—

"My assistance, Mr Vane? In what way?"

"Why, the fact is," said the Double, "we shall of course have to ascertain as nearly as possible what is the extent of your father's liabilities, and I could hardly go into this without some help, as I am entirely ignorant on the subject."

"Then what do you propose?" asked the Major, with a languid air, as though the conversation was beginning to bore him.

"Well," replied the Double, "the fact is, I was going to suggest, with your approval, that Miss Escombe might just run down with me this morning to Messrs Crewe and Hardcastle, as we did the other day, and talk matters over with them. Since you are so much better to-day—as I am glad to see, Major—perhaps you could spare the young lady for an hour or two. We could soon get to the city in my cab, and so settle matters comfortably. What do you say?"

He looked from one to the other for a reply, and could not conceal—at any rate, from Vane's jealous eyes—the anxiety with which he awaited it.

"So this was the creature's object," Vane reflected; "to enjoy a *tête-à-tête* in the carriage with that sweet girl. The villain!"

Vane did not reflect that there could be nothing particularly villanous in such a proposal, considering the purely friendly nature of the relations existing between himself and the Escombes, father and daughter. He had not seen any harm in his own recent drive with Miss Escombe to the city and back: why should his Double? But he did not care to ask himself such questions.

The proposal, as a matter of fact, was acceptable to both of those to whom it was addressed. Major Escombe was glad enough to find his valuable friend ready to carry out his good intentions, and as for Mildred—

It was she who was the first to speak. Poor child! She saw no harm in going out for another drive with Albert Vane; she only thought of the pleasure it would afford her, for was not the last delightful—an event in her life?

"If you could spare me for a little while, papa," she said, "I think it would be as well to go at once, as Mr Vane is so kind. I will make you nice and comfortable and perhaps you would like to have a nap. Then if you should wake and want anything, you can ring for Hannah."

Major Escombe acceded with proper dignity to this arrangement, and a few minutes afterwards Mildred was seated once more in Albert Vane's brougham, *vis-à-vis* to him whom she regarded as Albert Vane himself.

And Albert Vane's incorporate spirit—it could not be called his corporeal form—was there, too, in his own carriage, a passive and powerless spectator of this interview between his counterpart and the girl he loved! A pleasant position, truly!

"Oh, Mr Vane," cried Mildred innocently, as soon as the brougham was well started on its journey, "I am so glad to be alone with you at last. I could not tell you before papa, of course, how thankful I am to you for your further great kindness. I know he asked you to lend him some money, and that you did so at once. What a load of obligation you place us under! I cannot think how it is that you should be so good to us, unless that it is that you cannot resist the promptings of your generous disposition."

Every one of these words was as a knife stab to Vane's heart. It was all very well for that sweet girl to talk to *him* in this way; but to his hateful Double— Besides, his conscience had already begun to prick him. Did he deserve all these thanks, these tributes to his "goodness" and "kindness," — he who had been influenced to do the acts which called

forth such eulogies by a passion which he did not dare to define? And now all the fruits of his hypocrisy, his sham disinterestedness, were being reaped by another, for he could not regard his counterpart as anything else.

The Double, of course, received Miss Escombe's earnest thanks with mock modesty, Vane's own most skilfully assumed self-depreciation.

"I am only too glad," he said, "to render you and your papa a little service. There is no merit in it whatever. These little acts, such as they are, are my greatest luxuries. I wish I could do for every one in trouble what I have tried to do for you. It is really painful to me that I cannot find more abundant opportunities of making myself useful."

"What hideous humbug!" groaned Vane.

"Ah!" cried Mildred, "they say that riches are a great evil; but what a blessing they are when they are in such hands as yours! and you deserve to be rich, and to be fortunate in everything."

She had said almost the same thing to Vane before; but her words did not sound so sweet now.

"Yet I am afraid I waste a good deal too much money on what serious people call 'vanities,'" said the Double. "I sometimes think I am really doing wrong in surrounding myself, as I like to do, with objects of art and luxury. But I confess I am what ladies call 'house proud,' and few things please me more than seeing everything about me beautiful and in good taste."

"I am sure your house must be quite a palace—quite a dream of fairyland," exclaimed Miss Escombe. "How I long to see it!"

"I hope you will before long. Indeed, now that papa is so much better, I shall soon remind you of your promise to come with him and pay me a visit."

The conversation continued in this strain for some time. The Double, led on—or somehow causing him-

self to be led on—by his fair companion, dilated on the beauties and comforts of his bachelor abode, describing its furniture and art treasures in minute detail, as though striving to overwhelm the imagination of the simple girl with a sense of its splendour and luxury.

It seemed, so Vane thought, as though he were gradually leading up to at least a hint of that suggestion which Vane so dreaded to see realised. Yet no; though he appeared to approach the very verge of it, going so far even as to ask Mildred how she would like to inhabit such a house as his, he did not actually touch upon it.

"Is this how I should have acted?" Vane asked himself, with a sigh, and then he answered his own question, "I suppose so."

Mildred presently made a delicate reference to the special business which was the object of their journey, but the Double stopped her.

"No," he said, "don't let us talk about that. It will be time enough when we get to the lawyers."

And at the lawyers' they at last arrived. Vane followed them into the room of the acting partner, Mr Hardcastle, a genial, white-haired, fatherly old gentleman, a perfect type of the family solicitor, who welcomed Mildred very paternally.

He eyed the Double with a little surprise.

"Your—a—brother, my dear?" he asked.

"No," replied Mildred, feeling a little vexed at the consciousness that she was blushing. "This is Mr Albert Vane, a very kind friend of papa's; indeed, our landlord, to whom you wrote, you know."

"Oh! ah! yes, I see," said the old gentleman, with a quick glance which seemed to say that he saw a good deal more than he cared to recognise. "Pray take a seat."

Then they all went to business, and the Double in a guarded manner expressed his desire to give what

assistance he could to the almost bankrupt Major; but said that he could not see his way to any definite proposal until he had ascertained what was the exact extent of that gentleman's liabilities. Whereupon Mr Hardcastle produced a schedule of accounts, and, with the assistance of Mildred, who was able to recollect a good many bills not included in the list, they managed to get somewhat near the total of the Major's indebtedness. The sum was considerable, but by no means prodigious—a few hundreds at the most—and Vane, who closely watched the Double's countenance, could see that the result gave him a feeling of relief rather than otherwise.

"There will be no difficulty about that, Mr Hardcastle," he said; "I will undertake that the money shall be duly paid; but you must give the Major time, and, in the meanwhile, you must not allow him to be troubled with writs or dunning applications of any sort." The Double, at the same time, referred Mr Hardcastle to his own—that is, Vane's—solicitors and bankers, and so the morning's business was pleasantly settled.

After the departure of his visitors, the old lawyer consulted with his head clerk.

"I think it will be all right," he said, when he had detailed the proposal made to him. "I can see how matters stand. Ah! it will be a good match for that nice little lass. I only wish any daughter of mine had such a chance. Yes, yes, certainly. I have heard of Mr Albert Vane before. Worth thousands; good for any amount. Of course he will pay his father-in-law's debts when he is married—they would be a flea-bite to him—a mere flea-bite."

"Then you would suspend all proceedings, sir?" asked the clerk.

"Certainly—certainly, Shaw," replied Mr Hardcastle. "Make inquiries at the bankers and the lawyers, of course, as a matter of form. But it will

be all right—quite right, I am sure. Ah! it is a sweet little puss—and a lucky girl—a lucky girl!"

It is not to be wondered at that Mildred found the journey home a very happy one. She and her companion chatted about all sorts of trifles. The Double talked a good deal about himself and his habits, and amusements; told a good many fibs with a view to enhancing his own virtues in the eyes of the ingenuous young lady, who seemed as though she could never tire of his conversation.

But, no more than Vane, did he ever trespass on the ground of sentiment. His language was from first to last that of a friend or brother. No suspicion could for a moment have entered the mind of that innocent girl that he had any desire to engage her affection.

"And yet," reflected Vane, "this creature professes to share my feelings of love for her. Well—I must admit that his conduct is my own, whatever may be yet to come."

CHAPTER XIV.

A COMPACT.

Major Escombe was in a hospitable mood when his daughter returned with her companion. He pressed Vane's Double to stay to lunch, and it need not be said that the invitation was gladly accepted. The lunch was a good one, for the Major, thanks to that fifty pounds and the promised relief from the pressure of his liabilities, felt himself to be quite a rich and independent man, who could afford now to enjoy luxuries. He used to be an inveterate *bon vivant*, and to that circumstance his present ill-health was

perhaps mainly attributable. But his poverty had been good for him, as it kept him on that low diet which his doctor recommended. Now, however, he felt so much better that he thought he might indulge a little more freely in the good things of the table, and by his orders, without the knowledge of his daughter, a more than usually dainty repast had been prepared.

Mildred was a little alarmed at the sight of the comparatively luxurious luncheon, not so much on the score of economy, as on account of her father's digestion. She feared that he would commit some excess in the way of eating and drinking, and suffer for it afterwards. Nor were her apprehensions altogether unfounded.

The Major was in remarkably good spirits. A very few words had sufficed to acquaint him with the upshot of that satisfactory interview with the lawyer, and he did not want to hear details. It was enough for him that he had obtained a reprieve from the financial crisis that seemed impending over him, and he was very well pleased with the result. He did not overwhelm his friend with thanks—the Major was never extravagant in the matter of gratitude.

"Oh, papa!" cried Mildred, as her father expressed a desire for "just another of those cutlets," meanwhile filling for himself one more glass of Burgundy, "do you think it will agree with you?"

"Why not? why not?" asked the Major. "I am all right now; at any rate, I have not felt so well for a long time. I have been kept too low, much too low, and want nourishment, generous nourishment. Upon my word, these cutlets *à la soubise* are done to perfection. I had no idea that Hannah was such a good cook. Vane, the Burgundy is with you; help yourself."

"Thanks, Major," replied the Double, "it is really excellent. You are evidently a good judge of wine."

"I should think I ought to be," said the old soldier; "why, I looked after the wine at our mess for years;

they never did any good with it till I took it in hand. Then, by Jove! there wasn't a better cellar in her Majesty's service. Ah, if I were a rich man like you, Vane, I would show you how to keep a good table."

"You must come soon and give me a lesson," said the Double. "I have already told Miss Escombe how pleased I should be if you and she would honour me one day with a visit. I think I have a few things in my house that will please her eye, and as for you, Major, I shall certainly venture to consult you about the *menu* for a nice little dinner."

"You couldn't have a better adviser," replied the Major; "trust to me, and you can't go wrong. Yes, Mildred and I will be very happy to call on you before long. Let us know what time will suit you. Now I am more myself, I really must manage to get about a little. This confinement to the house is playing the deuce with me."

Meanwhile Albert Vane, in his disembodied condition, looked on with feelings that may easily be appreciated. While the Major was enjoying his lunch, Mildred and the Double seemed equally pleased for other reasons, and it bitterly galled Vane's jealous soul to observe the tacit delight which each felt in the other's society. Not a word was spoken, of course, which could convey the faintest hint of their secret sentiments, but those pretty glances, and smiles, and blushes, of which the Double was the unworthy object, and which once had been directed towards Vane himself, spoke volumes, while there was in the manner of his impersonator a vein of gentleness and tenderness that stung him to the quick by its resemblance to his own.

So it was with a sense of profound relief that he saw the Double rise at last to take his departure. The Major begged him not to "be in a hurry," as he would like to have a chat with him about "old times," that is, the Major's old times, in India and elsewhere.

But the Double, seeing no chance of another *tête-à-tête* with Mildred, who had little opportunity of taking part in the conversation, pleaded an engagement, and promised to call again soon.

"Do, my boy, do," cried the Major; "you will always find us at home. This house is a miserable den, I know"—the Major had forgotten for the moment who was the owner of that miserable den—"but, such as it is, its doors are always open to you. You cannot come too often, and fortunately I am now in a better position to receive you."

Mildred bit her lips and flushed. She was evidently vexed at the callous indifference of her father to the kindness which had placed him in that "better position;" but she said nothing on the subject, and the Double on his part discreetly ignored it.

"What a mean, selfish brute he is!" thought Vane, as he and the Double drove away from the house; "the fellow seems utterly absorbed in his own comforts and interests. Full to the brim of petty pride, he nevertheless accepts favours almost without a word of thanks, as though he had a right to them. And then he gives no thought to his daughter; allows her to go about driving with a young man, a comparative stranger, heedless of the risk she may run, so long as it serves his purposes. Ah! a peep into the magic mirror would do him good."

This last thought, hastily conceived, instantly suggested a new line of reflection. A glance into that magic mirror, he had said, would be good for the selfish old Major. Could it be good, had it been good, for any one else? Vane's conscience smote him. *Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur.* That trite but forcible moral had not impressed itself upon him for the first time. Not long ago he would have criticised the Major's conduct as severely as he did now, but he would have been utterly unconscious of the suggested parallel. Matters had changed with him since then.

Oh! if he could but shake off this dreadful influence, how altered his life would be! He had begun at last to see himself, his very, very self; and now it was too late. What had he gathered from the words of his tormentor? The association between him and his Double, that usurpation of his person and his life, and his own effacement and extinction, must last till death!

Albert Vane had ample opportunity of indulging in such reflections as these, for the Double, throughout the whole of their journey, utterly ignored his presence. That mysterious being sat opposite to him plunged in thought, and Vane had no difficulty in surmising what was the chief object of his meditations. He longed to question his Duplicate, but the attempt to do so was useless. He had no power to hold communion with the Double till the latter thought proper to address him.

And he continued thus effaced during the greater part of that day. At the club, whither the Double next repaired, and again at one or two houses of Vane's more familiar acquaintances, where he afterwards called, the unhappy man was necessarily set aside and disregarded, nor in the intervals between those visits did the Double seem disposed to seek his society. It was the longest term of effacement that Vane had yet experienced in his waking hours, and the awful gloom of this enforced solitude and silence weighed heavily on his soul. What if the Double, weary of his presence and his complainings, were to obliterate him for ever? The thought was appalling.

It was not till nightfall, when the Double was once more alone in his own abode, that this horrid ban was removed.

Vincent had retired, and the impersonator of his master paced the room in a state of unwonted agitation. Then he threw himself into an armchair, and there seemed to resume the thread of his reflections. Presently he spoke aloud,—

"No," he cried, "it is wrong; I must not continue in this course. But what am I to do?"

Vane strove to speak, and, after the long silence to which he had been condemned, it was with something like a thrill of pleasure that he found he had the power of audible utterance.

"Do you address that remark to me?" he asked.

"Eh?" exclaimed the Double, looking up. "Well, yes, you may take it so if you please."

"Am I at liberty to answer your question?"

"Certainly."

"And to advise you?"

"If you like."

"I know what you were thinking of. The same thought has occurred to me. It occupied my mind on the very eve of that fatal day when the mirror came into my possession, and brought you into existence."

"I know it. I am, as you are aware, only following the course that you were pursuing."

"Yes, I am convinced of that now. I recognise in all your acts, all your motives, all your tendencies, the exact counterpart of my own. You are terrible, but, I admit, you are logical."

"I am glad to find that you have arrived at so sensible a conclusion. We shall get on better now."

"My thoughts of Mildred Escombe were selfish, were reckless of danger to her, careless of everything but my own pleasure and enjoyment, but they were not wholly evil. I had no base design with regard to her."

"Nor have I."

"I can quite believe it. If you share my feelings and intend to act as I should have done in your place, you surely will not continue to trifle with this poor girl's affections, and eventually, perhaps, break her heart with disappointment."

"Precisely the same idea had occurred to me. That was the reason of my question."

"Then, sad as it is to me, I now feel that you and I are indeed one."

"I am very pleased to hear you acknowledge it. It will make us better friends. Yes, I share your feelings in every particular, in this matter as in all others. I love Mildred Escombe; there is no woman whom I would rather marry than her, if I could make up my mind to marry at all. But I cannot. I could not, even with her for my companion, bind myself by the ties of matrimony, with all its sordid cares and intolerable restraints, and with unknown possibilities of trouble in the future. Yes, I love Mildred Escombe, but not so well as I love Albert Vane."

Albert Vane himself felt shocked, horrified, by this blunt avowal. Yet did it not express only too accurately his own state of feeling not so long ago? He had never put that feeling into words, but if he had done so, these were the words he must have used. And now Mildred was dearer to him than all else in the world, himself not excepted, although he had lost her for ever.

"I cannot blame you," he said to the Double; "your sentiments are selfish, but they are consistent. I too would still have shrunk from the thought of marriage even with her, but I would not have continued to visit her, to seek opportunities of being alone with her, to impress her innocent mind with a sense of my virtue and generosity; to inspire her, in short, with hopes that could never be fulfilled."

"You think so?"

"Nay," cried Vane earnestly, "I am sure of it. The period must have come at last, with me as with you, when I should have seen that I was doing wrong, as you yourself have just admitted. I was selfish, as you are, but I was not altogether lost to every sense of manly honour. I might for a time have amused myself with that sweet girl's society, but with the repugnance I felt to the thought of marriage, I must,

sooner or later—indeed, sooner rather than later—have renounced this cruel course."

"And what of that plan of yours," asked the Double, "to take Mildred Escombe and her father into your house, to make her your housekeeper and his? What of that thought of yours that were anything to happen to that miserable old invalid while she still remained a guest under your roof—"

"Oh! for God's sake," interrupted Vane, "do not remind me of that. It was a base, a foolish thought, a mere passing fancy, to be repented and forgotten almost as soon as conceived. It was no deliberate design, believe me; but indeed you know it, and I feel, I am certain, you regard it in the same light."

"Yes," said the Double with a sigh, "I do." He paused for a few moments, and then added, "And now, how would you have me act? What do you think you would have done yourself?"

"I would have left her," cried Vane eagerly. "Strange, unfriendly as my conduct might have appeared to her and her father, I would have discontinued my visits to their house. I would have broken off all association with her before any serious mischief could be done. And—for I know myself now, only too well—I would have made excuses, even false ones if necessary, for my continued absence. Yes, and I would have sought amusement elsewhere; I would have tried to efface her from my memory, and ere long, with my capacity for shaking off all painful subjects from my mind—with my base love of self and my determination to secure my own comfort and ease—I should no doubt have succeeded."

"My own feeling exactly, at this present moment," said the Double. "There was no need for you to tell me all this, for, as a matter of fact, I had anticipated every word you have uttered. But it is interesting to observe how exactly our minds run in the same groove."

"Then what do you propose to do?"

"What? Why, leave her. Give her up. Forget her. Seek elsewhere a substitute for the pleasure of her society. What! Am I to allow my whole life to be spoilt by a sentimental passion for a pretty girl? I who have at my command the means of obtaining every enjoyment that the world can afford? Am I to give up everything for Mildred Escombe? No, not if she were a thousand times as sweet and charming as she is. Albert Vane is not to be sacrificed for the best, the fairest woman that ever walked the earth. Yes, I must leave her, forget her—if I can."

Detestable as this language seemed to Albert Vane, it lifted a load of anxiety and fear from his mind. If but the Double should persist in the determination thus expressed, half the hardship of his own cruel lot would be removed. Its ordinary conditions were bad enough, but the necessity of continuing to haunt the being who had supplanted him would be rendered more endurable when it no longer involved the mental torture of witnessing his interviews with Mildred Escombe, of observing the gradual development of their mutual love, of watching their progress, step by step, towards a danger which he contemplated with horror. He himself might suffer a lifelong misery, but, at least, the woman he loved would be spared.

"And now," said the Double, breaking in upon his musing, and speaking in a cheerful tone, "that is settled. I know it must be a great relief to your mind, and I think it will bring us together a little nearer. For why should we be enemies? A man surely ought to be his own best friend, at any rate that has always been my opinion; and you and I are one. I am well aware that our mutual relations must be very disagreeable to you, and I am truly sorry for it. The mere thought that I have hovering about me a sort of unhappy spirit distresses and annoys me, even when I am not listening to its re-

proaches. That is why I efface you so often. But I assure you it pains me to do it. I would much rather have your society. Come, cheer up and be pleasant. Think how agreeable it would have been to you to have at your call a second self to converse and consult with, to be your companion in your pleasures, and in your solitude; a spirit to whom you could always look for sympathy and advice; who would never argue or quarrel with you, who would, in short, love you like yourself, being, in fact, a part of yourself."

"I am afraid," replied Vane, "that I shall find it difficult to assume such a character. I admit the identity between us; I freely acknowledge that you are now exactly what I should have been if you had never been called into existence. But you cannot help seeing that there is now a wide difference between us. I am not what I was, and you are."

"That is very true," said the Double, "but I really don't see why this difference should divide us. There is, after all, so much in common between us that you ought to become quite a congenial comrade."

"I am more likely to take the form of an accusing conscience," observed Vane.

"Not at all," answered the Double, "only let us avoid all subjects of controversy, and we shall easily get over the difficulty. The great cause of dissension between us being now removed, I see nothing left to quarrel about. You may not, perhaps, approve of all I do; but make a charitable allowance for me as an ordinary mortal, and be kindly blind to my little faults. In that case we shall get on together capitally."

Yes; silence the voice of conscience; that is the best way to be happy. So Albert Vane thought once; he never expected to see this abstract proposition put in such a concrete form.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I must make the best of the position. I am bound to you for life, and

must haunt you like your shadow till your death and mine. And if, as you say, your conduct offends me, at least I must remember that it is my own. No, I will not trouble you any more with complainings and reproaches, so long, at least, as you adhere to your resolve in one respect."

"That is spoken sensibly," cried the Double. "I told you that we should be excellent friends at last. Henceforth we will devote our whole existence to the pursuit of pleasure."

CHAPTER XV.

SUBSTANCE AND SHADOW.

If Albert Vane could have entertained any doubt as to the intention of the Double to keep his promise, the conduct of his counterpart during the next few days must have afforded sufficient proof of his sincerity. He seemed to have entirely recovered his peace of mind, and to have shaken off all thought of Mildred Escombe as completely as though she had never crossed his path. In his intercourse with Vane, now more frequent than it had lately been, he never alluded to her in any way, and Vane fondly hoped that his passion for her had faded from his heart.

Would he himself have been thus inconstant? By that question only could he test the Double's actual state of feeling. Yet he could not give it a positive answer. He felt puzzled. The more that the consciousness of his new self, his altered character, the fruit of a bitter experience, was forced upon his mind, the more dim and uncertain grew

the sense of that former disposition which the Double was perpetuating.

"Surely," he thought, "I could not so soon forget her. Surely this indifference, this silence with regard to her, is either affected in order to deceive me, or it conceals some depth of sentiment which I cannot fathom. It is not alone that I love Mildred now more dearly than ever, but I cannot think that I would have ceased to love her even if this terrible change had not come over my life."

Nevertheless, the Double seemed as quietly gay and serenely unconcerned as though he had no trouble on his mind. His daily life was in every respect identical with that which Vane had ordinarily pursued. He devoted himself, as Vane had done, to a round of mild dissipation, spending a certain amount of time at his club; making afternoon calls on his many friends or acquaintances; occasionally visiting the theatres, concerts, and exhibitions, and now and then going to balls and dinner parties. In all these wanderings Vane followed him like his shadow, and, indeed, in time he became in a measure used, and even reconciled, to this ignoble position. It did, at first, cause him a pang to act thus the part of a mere passive looker-on and listener while his impersonator was chatting or amusing himself; yet by degrees he strove to identify his mind with that of his representative, and even attempted to enjoy that which the Double enjoyed.

So long as that fearful being would only abstain from pursuing, from thinking of Mildred Escombe, even his own hard lot might be tolerable. But he was in constant dread lest the old flame should break out again in the Double's breast, and he watched for any sign of a relapse with trembling apprehension.

Yet no; to all appearance his counterpart had utterly forgotten the girl he had professed to love. At least so Vane gathered from the tone of his conversation.

Thus they had one night been at a dance attended by some of the prettiest women in London. Vane had been much sought after by givers of such entertainments, as might have been expected in the case of a young, wealthy, good-looking, and singularly amiable bachelor, who was moreover reputed to be not a "marrying man,' and was therefore the more eagerly competed for by his female acquaintances.

"Yes," said the Double, on the morning after the ball, "it was a pretty crowd, and I confess that I was greatly amused. Mrs Fanshaw's manœuvre to get me with her charming daughter into that snug conservatory was ingenious, and the success of her sister-in-law, Mrs Blatchington, in inducing me to give her 'dear child' a little fresh air on the balcony, was quite a master-stroke. I rather fancy that there will be some dissension between those estimable families before long."

"You seemed to pay what is called a good deal of attention to both the young ladies," observed Vane.

"True; I said some very pretty things to both of them, that might mean anything or nothing. It is really very amusing to see how the dear girls take in all this nonsense. More than one has treasured up such words of mine for months, and has actually repeated them to me afterwards, only to find that there was nothing in them after all."

"Is there not something like cruelty in conduct of that sort?" suggested Vane.

"Oh! I don't know," carelessly replied the Double. "Flattery is always pleasant, to offer as to receive, and if the person flattered takes you too seriously, that is not your fault. These young ladies ought to know by this time that I don't intend to marry, and if they attach too much weight to any little compliments I may pay them, why, that is their look out."

Vane felt disgusted at this cynical language, but he reflected with shame that it was just such as he

himself had been accustomed to use. However, it was so far satisfactory, inasmuch as it indicated that the mind of the Double was still unchanged on the subject of matrimony.

Into the pursuit of such pleasures as he sought, the Double seemed to throw himself, so Vane fancied, with even more than his prototype's energy. Vane had always been more or less of a lounger, or *flâneur*, taking life very easily, and its enjoyments very tranquilly. He never allowed himself to be stirred into anything like a state of excitement or enthusiasm, because, he used to say, there was always the risk of a depressing reaction afterwards. But the Double seemed to enjoy pleasure with an almost childish zest. Vane one day pointed out that this was inconsistent with his own past, but the Double denied it, saying,—

"No, I assure you there is no difference between your sensations and mine. If you had continued the active part of our common existence, you would have felt just as I do at this moment. You, like myself, would have determined more firmly than ever to sacrifice yourself to nothing; but endeavour to get all the enjoyment you could out of life, and rid yourself of all that was painful or unpleasant. I intend henceforth to allow nothing to disturb my happiness; my life, I am resolved, shall be an ideal one. If trouble should come, in any shape or form, I shall do my best to avert it or to escape it; meanwhile, I shall not anticipate it. I have the means of gratifying every desire, every caprice, so why should I neglect my opportunities? I assure you that if you watch my progress, you will find it a most interesting and edifying study."

Vane had no doubt of it. The course which his impersonator was following disgusted him, but it taught him much. This picture of a man living only for himself, without a thought or care for any other

human being, filled him with loathing; but he felt that, in looking upon it, he was only gazing on his own likeness. Strange that he had never seen it in that light before! But, then, he had not yet looked into the magic mirror.

If the trivial amusements in which the Double habitually indulged failed to pall upon him, Vane for his own part had become weary enough of them. Nor was it alone on account of the passive share he was forced to take in such proceedings. There was, for a time, a certain charm of novelty in his position. To look on, an unseen and inactive spectator, at the comedy of life, imparted to all he witnessed, even to its most trifling details, a sort of philosophic interest, which he might not have found in it under any other conditions. He regarded everything now with the eyes of the mind rather than of the senses, and began to realise the feeling which prompted the preacher of old to declare that "all is vanity."

Yet the moral thus conveyed was trite and easily learned, and when once learned, the examples that taught it seemed stale and unprofitable. So ere long he grew utterly sick and tired of those endless wanderings from club to theatre, from show to party, varied by occasional drives to haunts of fashion in the suburbs, up the river, or to race-meetings. The Double, like himself, never indulged in any excess; he was one of the most moderate, most prudent of beings. He played cards a little, but never for high stakes; he would have a small bet on a race, or take part in a sweepstake, but he never gambled. He liked a good glass of wine, and enjoyed his cigarette, but he never either drank or smoked too much, and he systematically avoided all the coarser dissipations usually sought by young, wealthy, and idle men. He would even go to the very brink of temptation, but he never fell into it. He would, so to speak, look over the edge, smile, shake his head, and turn away.

"And this is the man I was!" Vane mused; "a being almost perfect in many virtues that the world respects, and yet utterly vile and contemptible. And for having once been such a man, I am doomed to a life-long punishment. Surely it is a hard fate, harder even than I deserved. For if I erred, it was in ignorance, not with deliberation. I was a spoilt child of fortune, without guidance or training, and had never learnt a bitter lesson from adversity. And as I was then, so now is this creature who takes my shape. Should I blame him too severely? No, I pity him rather, as I pity my former self. I am condemned for my own sins to watch and follow him to the end of his days and my own; but I see the truth while he remains blind. He has no chance of an altered mind; no glance into the magic mirror will tell him what I have learned. Ah! whose fate, after all, is the worse, his or mine?"

Faithfully as the Double cultivated all Vane's usual habits, there was one at least which he appeared to shun. He no longer haunted the sale-rooms of auctioneers and dealers in *bric-à-brac*, and therefore ceased to visit Reuben Max. Was it that he had lost his taste for such pursuits, or that he deliberately wished to avoid the German dealer, who might at any moment have revealed that last secret of the mirror which Vane so yearned to know? The latter conjecture must have been the true one, for the intention with which the Double resisted all attempts on Vane's part to induce him to call on Max again was unmistakable. He was evidently resolved that Vane should not discover how the spell might be lifted.

It has already been remarked that Vane was surprised at the zeal with which the Double devoted himself to his pleasures. But a greater surprise, involving no slight perplexity, was yet in store for him. Little by little there was developed in his Duplicate a spirit of feverish restlessness, such as he himself

had never displayed. Those intervals of repose—those periods of quiet idling at his club and in his own house—which the Double had also accustomed himself to enjoy, now became less frequent and of shorter duration. It appeared to Vane as though he feared to give himself time to indulge in reflection, for if at any moment he caught his impersonator relapsing into his own habit of dreamy meditation, he noticed that the Double would generally arouse himself abruptly and have recourse to some kind of action.

Now he would engage Vane in animated conversation; now he would hastily order Vincent to call his brougham, and he would start off on some expedition of pleasure evidently unpremeditated.

"I hate solitude," he exclaimed one day. "Forgive me if I say so in your presence; but you understand what I mean. I must have occupation for my mind, no matter what. I almost wish I could find something to do, some object in life; it would be a change, at any rate, from this monotonous existence."

Strange! Vane had never felt any such yearnings for an active life. All objects of ambition had ever been to him indifferent, if not contemptible. It was enough for him that they offered prospects of trouble and probable disappointment, and from these he shrank as from the contagion of a plague.

"I have half a mind," the Double continued, "to buy a yacht, and make a long sea voyage, or travel on the Continent, or stand for Parliament somewhere. I am getting heartily sick of this endless round of every-day, so-called, pleasure. It is becoming tiresome and unendurable."

"I quite agree with you," said Vane, "and I fully believe that I should have come to the same way of thinking myself by this time."

"Yes," the Double went on, "I must go into the matter, and find out what other men do to occupy themselves; how they set about it, and so forth. Anything

is better than to sit here and mope, and—and remember."

These words were followed by a profound sigh and a prolonged silence.

Vane was startled, alarmed. For the first time it flashed upon him that there was some deeper cause for the Double's weariness and restlessness than the mere monotony of his pleasures. What was that cause? Could he doubt its nature? He dared not answer the question, but he awaited the further development of the Double's new mood with keen anxiety. Nor had he long to wait.

One night the Double returned from a brilliant ball, given at one of the most fashionable houses to which he had the *entrée*. Among the company had been many women noted in society for their beauty and accomplishments, and with several of them he had waltzed and flirted, for the handsome, rich young man, well-born and well-bred, always had the pick of the best partners at every dance; and never had Vane been in better "form" than was his Double that night. He had seemed to all who observed him to be overflowing with gaiety and animation, and not only pleased, but surprised his acquaintances.

"I always thought Albert Vane charming, mamma," said one fair damsel to her mother, after the ball, "but I never believed he could be so jolly as he was to-night. What a flow of spirits he seems to have! I don't know any man whose talk is so delightful and so varied."

"Yes," replied the mother, "he seemed pretty lively, and it is odd, too, for I always regarded Albert Vane as rather a languid and lazy man,—gentlemanly, no doubt, but much too quiet. Take care, my dear, that he has a card for our 'at home' next week."

"I won't forget, mamma, you may be sure," was the daughter's dutiful reply.

At that very moment Albert Vane's Double was seated in his armchair in his own house, looking very

weary and despondent. There was about his hair and clothes a "rumpled" appearance which Vane himself had rarely, if ever, displayed after a night's festivity. As a rule, he usually returned from a party without a wrinkle on either his brow or his shirt front, but this disorder of mind and attire was not uncommon now with his Double on such occasions. Had he not other and more serious thoughts to occupy him, Vane might have been shocked to see how his counterpart was failing to keep up his character.

"No," cried the Double, in a manner which caused Vane to be uncertain whether he was talking to him or to himself; "I can lead this life no longer. It wearies, it disgusts me. The vapid, insincere talk of those artificial women bores me to death. I am sick alike of flattering, and being flattered. These ball-rooms are like forcing-houses, and they suffocate me. Oh, for a breath of pure, fresh air, and the honest, simple language of a sweet, innocent girl! That is the sort of change I want, and that I must have."

Vane, though daily and hourly expecting some such outburst as this, was horrified now that it had come. It was clear to him at last that the wayward, restless moods of his Double arose from the failure of his endeavours to exclude Mildred Escombe from his thoughts, and to resist the temptation to seek her society again. And he was only too conscious that a precisely similar struggle of feeling must have been experienced by himself. Yet, hopeless as he knew the attempt to be, he could not help appealing to his counterpart to keep his pledge.

"What is this you say?" he asked. "Have you forgotten our compact? You resolved to trouble Mildred Escombe no more. Do you intend to repeat the old, cruel, and fruitless course?"

"Ah," said the Double, starting to his feet; "you heard me then? I was not aware of your presence You had no right to break in upon my private reflec-

tions. But it was my own fault. I should have effaced you."

Vane feared that this was what the Double would now proceed to do, in which case all attempts at expostulation on his part would be useless.

"Stay," he cried, "hear me for a moment. I know full well that all I can say is powerless to divert you from any purpose which you may have formed, which, doubtless, I myself would have formed in your place. Yet still listen to me. The words which I feel prompted to speak would have been spoken to me also, not perhaps by a voice like mine, but by another equivalent to it—the voice of my own better self."

"I do not care to hear such a voice," said the Double, impatiently.

"Nor did I, alas! at any time," replied Vane; "yet there were moments when I was forced to listen to it in spite of myself. Oh! let this be such a moment Let me beg and implore you to yield to the generous impulse which inspires you now and again, as once it inspired me. There were times in my past life when I, too, felt prompted to act bravely and unselfishly, and I perceive that you yourself are not without such feelings."

"Well," sneered the Double, "and what came of your noble impulses?"

"Ah!" sighed Vane, "they soon faded; I too easily dismissed them from my mind."

"It is exactly the same with me," retorted the Double; "can you wonder at it?"

"No, indeed," answered Vane; "but still, allow me a word before you doom me to effacement. Think. You have resolved not to visit that poor, innocent girl again, and you have done right. Averse to marriage, and yet still loving her, you felt that further association with her would be cruel to her, painful to yourself, perhaps dangerous to both. Think what the consequence might be if you were to alter

your determination. No word of love has yet been spoken to her, but is it possible that you can long restrain yourself, feeling as you do, and if so, what must be the result? A broken heart or a ruined life."

"You look too far ahead," cried the Double, with a mocking laugh; "why anticipate such evils? Who thinks of injuring Mildred Escombe? You, not I. I tell you, I must and will see her again, and all this talk is useless."

"One word, yet. Listen to me, as to your own conscience—" pleaded Vane.

"Silence!" cried the Double, and they spoke no more.

CHAPTER XVI.

DEAL STREET RE-VISITED.

As might have been expected, Major Escombe suffered from his too free indulgence at that luxurious luncheon to which he had so hospitably invited Albert Vane, or his Double. Its injurious effects, however, did not manifest themselves immediately. Indeed, it might have been well if the good things of which the Major partook on that occasion had upset him a little, and so warned him to be more careful in his diet. It was not so, however, and the impunity with which he had committed that excess tempted him to further enjoyment, and for a time he believed that his own prescription of what he was pleased to call "generous nourishment," was doing him far more good than the limited dietary recommended to him by an experienced physician.

"I have not felt better for years," he said to his anxious daughter. "Bah! doctors are fools, and that

fellow Muggridge would have starved me to death. I declare I feel quite strong, almost up to my old fighting form, and it is all the result of good cookery and good wine. Upon my word, if I were to turn doctor, I think I would open not a dispensary, but a restaurant. Ah! Mildred, your old father knows best what is good for him."

Mildred sincerely hoped that it might be so, but she had her misgivings, which were by no means alleviated by the parting words of the now discharged doctor.

"Well, well, my dear," said the medical man as Mildred descended the stairs with him; "I don't want to press my services on your father—far from it—I have too much practice as it is: but mark my words, if Major Escombe continues in this course of high feeding and free drinking only a little longer, you will soon have to send for me again—or the undertaker."

Then, seeing that he had alarmed the poor girl, and brought the tears into her eyes, the kindly doctor added,—

"There, there, don't be afraid, my dear. Perhaps no great harm may be done after all. Your father will have a break-down soon, that is certain, but probably it will be all the better for him in the end, as it will teach him a lesson. Meanwhile, do what you can to keep him quiet—that is, don't let him eat and drink so much, and send for me at once if you want me. Good-bye, God bless you!"

"Stay, just one moment," said Mildred, as Dr Muggridge was about to open the street door. "I hardly like to speak of it; but I know papa—we—owe you a good deal of money for your attendance, and—and—"

"Why yes, my dear, that's true enough," replied the doctor. "Your father has run up rather a long bill, and you know even doctors must live, if their patients don't. I must say I would be glad if Major Escombe

could find it convenient to settle my little account. It has been going now for—let me see—ah! nearly two years."

"I know that, Dr Muggridge," said Mildred, "I do hope he will be able to pay you soon. But you won't mind waiting a little longer, will you?"

"Well, well, I suppose not; but there, don't trouble your pretty little head about it. You look after papa, and see that the bill doesn't get any bigger. I daresay he will settle up before long."

With many thanks, Mildred then allowed the doctor to depart, but as he did so he muttered, "Hum! I think my money is pretty safe. If that sweet little girl marries that rich young gentleman, Albert Vane, as I undertake to swear she will, she won't let me suffer, bless her!"

For Dr Muggridge had met Albert Vane many a time at the little house in Deal Street, and his shrewd habit of observation readily told him what was the mutual state of feeling between these young people, though he drew thence a conclusion hardly justified by the facts.

Major Escombe's career of dissipation—his course of self-treatment, he called it—as the doctor anticipated, did not last long. Before many days, the expected break-down duly occurred, and the imprudent Major was groaning in agony under the double infliction of acute gout and dyspepsia.

He was not a tranquil patient, as may easily be supposed. In fact, his temper would have been unbearable to a nurse less amiable than his devoted daughter. He bullied her, he even swore at her, between his groans; assiduous, considerate as her attention was, nothing she could do satisfied him. It was only during a blessed interval of sleep now and then that the poor girl had any peace.

And in such intervals Mildred would sit indulging in sad reflections, of which her father's illness was not the only subject.

"What can have become of him?" she mused. "Why has he not come to see us for so many, many days? What can be the reason of it? Perhaps he thought that as papa seemed so much better he would not require his company so often, and how good he was to come, and sit with him, and cheer him up! It must have been that, surely. It could not be that he was afraid that papa would worry him about business, and borrow some more money of him. Oh! no; he is too noble, too generous for that. But I hope papa will not ask him for any more favours when he comes again. Ah! when will that be? Mrs Newton says he goes out a great deal to dinner and dancing parties. Well, of course he does. What of that? He must amuse himself, like other young men, and I daresay he meets lots of nice people—nice girls. Oh! if I could only meet him at a dance, quite by surprise, how delightful that would be! And I wonder what he would think of me if he were to see me in a beautiful new ball dress, and wearing poor mamma's jewels, or what is left of them! I wonder whether he would ask me to dance with him, or whether he would have too many engagements to notice a poor, little thing like me! But it is very foolish of me to run on like this. What would he think of me if he knew that I felt about him as I do? He does not, cannot, care for me—in that way. He is only a friend—though such a friend! the best and most generous in the world, and he can never be anything else to me. He never said anything to me but what a brother might say; never even tried to flatter me, or pay me compliments, as some young men might have done in his place. Oh! he is as honourable and sincere as he is kind, and would never think of saying anything he did not mean. But why does he stay away from us so long? What would I not give to see his darling face again!"

So mused Mildred Escombe in these, or other words

—all much to the same effect—many a time as she sat by her father's bedside while he was sleeping or dozing. The Major, too, missed his useful friend, but expressed his opinion of Albert Vane's absence in somewhat different terms from those used by his daughter in her maiden meditations.

"He calls himself a friend, does he?" the invalid growled. "A pretty sort of friend to leave me here lying ill and suffering the tortures of the devil—or the devil's victims, rather. Does he know how bad I am, Mildred?"

"No, papa, I am sure he doesn't, or he certainly would have called."

"Then why the deuce didn't you let him know? Is this your consideration for me; when you know Vane might have come and given me some assistance, or at any rate been company for me, when I am quite alone—or almost alone?"

"I will write and tell him that you wish to see him, papa dear, if you like."

"Like? What an absurd remark! Do you want me to beg Mr Vane as a favour to come and see an old friend lying ill and in horrible pain? Vane ought to have come to look me up long ago, and if you gave him a hint to that effect, that I think would be the proper way to put it. Like to see him, indeed!"

Mildred as usual quietly allowed her querulous father's temper gradually to grumble itself away. She said nothing; knowing full well that no answer at all is sometimes even more effective than the proverbial soft one, as a means of turning away wrath.

But she sat down there and then and wrote a brief, delicately-worded letter to Albert Vane, saying that her father had had a relapse, and was very ill, and how pleased he would be if Mr Vane would not mind looking in one day and sitting with him for a little while.

It was with a beating heart and a trembling hand

that Mildred indited these few lines. Painful as the occasion was, she could hardly repress a feeling of joy at the thought that it would be the means of bringing once more to her side the man she "so dearly—that is, so greatly esteemed."

And as chance would have it, it was on the morrow of that last conversation between Albert Vane and his Double that her letter arrived.

Vane himself had long ceased to feel any sense of outrage or even annoyance at the sight of his counterpart taking the liberty of opening and reading his correspondence. Matters had gone too far for that, and he was now thoroughly submissive to his fate.

Yet a pang of disgust and bitter anger seized him as he saw Mildred's little letter placed by Vincent in his rival's hand. He knew it was from Mildred in a moment. It was not alone the peculiar delicate tint of the envelope which she was accustomed to use, that told him so, but the flushed cheek, the sparkling eye, and the eager look of the Double, bore unmistakable evidence of the fact.

The latter read the note quickly, and then seemed entirely to recover his self-possession.

"An odd coincidence!" he coolly remarked, as he showed the epistle to Vane. "We were only talking of her last night, and see, here is an invitation to visit her—and her father, of course."

"What shall you do?" asked Vane.

"What shall I do?" echoed the Double with a slight laugh; "what can I do, but comply with so prettily-worded a request? Could I have the heart to leave that poor man lying there in his suffering, and refuse to visit him?"

"You are fertile in excuses," cried Vane, "and are not particular about making false ones when you receive an unwelcome invitation."

"But this can hardly be called an unwelcome invitation, though the occasion of it is a sad one. Besides,

do you wish me to reply to Miss Escombe's letter with a false excuse? What would you have done in my place?"

"I cannot resist your diabolical logic," said Vane; 'it is true I—as I was—could not have resisted such a temptation, nor can you—nor will you."

"Nor will I," quietly observed the Double. Then after a brief pause, he added, "and now I will go up and dress."

He was about to touch the bell for Vincent when Vane stopped him.

"Stay!" he exclaimed, "while I have still the power to speak to you—before you exercise your power of silencing me—let me make one last appeal to your better nature."

"Say on," remarked the Double, with perfect *sang-froid.*

"You are about to visit Miss Escombe once more; you are going to her father's house ostensibly, at least, on an errand of mercy, to comfort a sick man in his suffering. Surely you will not take advantage of your opportunity to trifle with his daughter's heart."

"What would you have done yourself under the circumstances?" asked the Double.

"Cruel, remorseless being!" cried the unhappy man; "why torture me by reference to my past?"

"Why?" echoed the Double, "for a very good reason; because your past happens to be my present. I shall do nothing, I assure you, that you would not have done—I never do. You ought surely to be aware of that by this time."

"I cannot tell what I might have done!" exclaimed Vane. "Base and vile as I find myself to have been, I know that I might have been capable of any cruelty, any treachery while moved by the hard, selfish feelings which you expressed last night. But, oh! for God's sake, spare her!"

"You judge yourself, and therefore you judge me,

too harshly," responded the Double. "I go to Major Escombe's house to-day with no villanous design whatever. I confess that my visiting him is only a pretext. You know as well as I do that the miserable old egotist might have rotted in a hovel before I would have crossed the road to see him. I go simply to enjoy once more the exquisite pleasure of his daughter's society, which will be rendered all the more enjoyable by my long absence, due to a sense of ridiculously false delicacy. My conduct, as far as I know at present, will be towards her exactly the same as it always has been, neither more nor less—that of a friend."

"You assure me of that?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"Then I am satisfied. I do not like the idea of your visiting that house again; but as it must be so, I will accept your pledge."

"You have no option. Now let me go and dress."

Certainly Albert Vane could have nothing to complain of in his Double's conduct towards Miss Escombe during this visit, though it caused him bitter pain to note the evident delight which Mildred felt at meeting him once more. Never in all his experience had she displayed such unmistakable signs of her affection. Her face was suffused with blushes, and her countenance was lighted up with a joy which she could not conceal.

"You have been away from us so long," she said, "I was almost afraid you had quite forgotten us."

"Oh, no," replied the Double, "I could not do that. But the fact is, your papa was so much better when I last saw him, that I fancied he could dispense with my society."

"I thought that," said Mildred.

"And," continued the Double, "I fully intended to call again soon, even if you had not written; indeed, I was thinking about it only last night."

This conversation took place in the sitting-room ordinarily occupied by the Major, who was lying in bed in the adjacent chamber. He had been dozing, but an impatient touch at his bell soon gave warning that he had awakened.

It were needless to relate what passed by the bedside of the sick man, to repeat his querulous complaints and his not too delicate hints that Vane might have visited him before; hints which the Double took with his usual amiable grace, and with the most earnest apologies.

There was only one passage in the conversation that is worth recording, and Vane thought it significant.

"You can hardly be very comfortable here, Major," said the Double; "the rooms, like the house, are very small, and I rather fancy that the neighbourhood, fashionable as it is, is not too healthy."

"Comfortable!" echoed the Major; "the place is a den—a den, sir, as I believe I once said before. But what am I to do? I have nowhere else to go, in fact, it is only by your—by your—sufferance that I am here at all."

"Don't say that, Major," pleaded the Double; "I am sure I am only too happy to have you in a house of mine, poor as the place is; but I will see if I can't get you more agreeable quarters, that is, when you are able to move. I have other and better houses, and perhaps you might find yourself more comfortable in one of these."

"I wish you could manage it, I am sure," said the Major; "this place is hardly fit to put a dog in, much less a sick man."

"Well, well," replied the Double cheerfully, "we will see about it."

Soon after this he took his departure.

"Oh, Mr Vane," cried Mildred, as he was leaving, "how kind it was of you to offer to remove papa to another and better house! But do you think it could

really be done without putting you to too great inconvenience?"

"Yes," replied the Double, quietly; "I think so."

For several hours afterwards Vane, as on past occasions, found that his impersonator had once more condemned him to effacement, and it was not until late in the day that he recognised his presence.

"Well," remarked the Double, "you see I did no harm to-day. I in no way trifled with Miss Escombe's heart, to quote your words; in short, I kept my promise to the letter."

"I don't know that," retorted Vane; "what did you mean by that offer to provide Major Escombe with another residence?"

"What did I mean?" echoed the Double; "why, what do you suppose?"

"Surely," exclaimed Vane, "you do not contemplate carrying out that rash, that criminal idea which once passed through my mind in an evil moment, an idea which, believe me, I would never have put in practice?"

"Why not?" asked the Double; "what is there criminal about it? I think it is a very good idea myself."

"It is impossible."

"Oh, pardon me, it is by no means impossible. Indeed it is very probable; in short I tell you plainly that I shall take an early opportunity of putting it to Major Escombe and his daughter in the shape of a distinct proposal."

"Then," exclaimed Vane, "if that is your design—if that is the design which I would have carried to its vile end—neither you nor I deserve to live."

"Very likely," observed the Double, lighting a cigarette.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PROPOSAL.

THE next few days formed a term of terrible trial for Albert Vane. During the whole of this time the Double ignored and effaced him. Never before had he undergone such persistent and protracted obliteration. It was one long period of horrible silence and solitude, rendered more hideous by the constant sight of his rival brooding over his plans, and thinking evil thoughts—as they must have been—of her who was to him more precious than life itself.

Another visit did the Double pay to the house of the Escombes, and yet another. Again and again he made reference to the dreaded suggestion that the Major and his daughter should remove to another and more commodious dwelling. The proposal, so far, had taken no definite shape. Yet Vane was terrified to see that it gained favour with the selfish invalid, eager to avail himself of an arrangement which would contribute so much to his personal comfort, while as for Mildred, her only feeling in the matter was one of gratitude.

At last the moment came when that rash and long-repented scheme, which Vane had fancied rather than formed, was actually propounded by his remorseless other self.

Major Escombe was once more convalescent. He was at anyrate well enough to be removed from his bedroom, and recline in his invalid chair, propped up with pillows, and resting his gouty foot on a cushion. Mildred sat on one side of his couch, and the Double on the other, while Vane, unseen by all, watched their every movement, and listened to their every word.

"Well," asked the Major, after a brief pause in the

conversation, "have you found another house for us yet?"

"I am sorry to say," replied the Double, "that every house I have is occupied; and, what is worse, there is no chance of getting rid of any of the tenants, at least for some considerable time. Most of them have leases, and, although I have visited every one of them in succession, and made all sorts of offers to them—indeed, to tell you the truth, I have stretched the point rather far in some cases—not one of them will move."

Vane knew this statement to be a tissue of falsehoods; but that was a small detail in the villany of his counterpart.

"That is a great nuisance," grumbled the Major "Then I suppose the thing can't be done?"

"I don't say that," replied the Double. "I did think of taking a house for you at my own expense, but I thought that perhaps you would not like such an arrangement."

This suggestion touched the Major's pride, as Vane saw it was intended to do.

"By no means," he said stiffly. "I would not for a moment consent that you should go to any expense for me. You need say no more, Mr Vane. There is an end of the matter."

"I beg your pardon," pleaded the Double. "But that is not the end of the matter, by any means. I have another proposal to make, and it is one that is exceedingly agreeable to me—one that I would wish to carry out rather than any other. My only fear is lest it should not be acceptable to you or—to Miss Escombe."

"My daughter," said the Major, "would certainly consent to any arrangement that I approved of."

"Oh, yes, papa, of course," murmured Mildred, whose countenance betokened an eager curiosity to learn the nature of their good friend's plan.

"The fact is, Major," said the Double,' I have a very

large house. Indeed it is almost ridiculously big for a bachelor like myself. My friends have often wondered why I do not rather take a flat or go into chambers. Well, I like it. It is a fancy of mine to keep this house, and furnish it, as I have endeavoured to do, with some taste, perfect comfort, and, in fact, I may say considerable luxury. I like to be surrounded with beautiful objects, and, as I have often told Miss Escombe, perhaps I spend too much money on works of art and *virtu*, and the like. Happily I have the means of gratifying my whims, and I see no reason why I should not do so, as long as I don't spend all I have on myself."

"No reason whatever," put in the Major, who was evidently becoming interested.

"Yet," continued the Double, "I am not happy in my big house. The sense of its size somehow seems to overwhelm me and depress me. In short, I feel dull and lonely there. At one time I had a sister to live with me, and keep house for me, but she left me, poor girl, some years ago, to marry—very unfortunately, as it has turned out—and I have had to do—well, what I could, for her and her family. But that by the way. Indeed, so solitary have I felt in this large house, that lately I began to entertain thoughts of leaving it and taking a smaller one. Yet I cannot bear to part with my pretty things, my old furniture, china, arms, tapestry and *bric-à-brac*, which I should be compelled to do if I changed my quarters. You may think me rather a long time coming to the point, but I really wish to make my position clear not only to yourself, but especially, if you will allow me to say so—to Miss Escombe."

"Oh, I understand it perfectly," said Mildred. "I can quite realise your lonely feeling in that large place. I should feel like that my—"

"Hush!" cried the Major impatiently. "Don't interrupt Mr Vane. Let him go on."

Thus encouraged, the Double continued,—

"Now what I have to suggest is this. Why should not you and your daughter take up your quarters in this house of mine? There is plenty of room there for all of us, indeed for twice our number. You and Miss Escombe would have your *suites* of apartments quite distinct and separate from mine. We need hardly meet except at your own pleasure; though I might hope, perhaps, that we should occasionally exchange visits. However, all these things are matters of detail, which, if you accept my proposal, I would leave entirely in your hands. The main point is, I have abundant spare room in my house—will you accept a portion of it?"

"Your suggestion," replied the Major, speaking as though he were endeavouring to restrain himself, "is a very tempting one, certainly. But may I ask on what terms you make it? I presume you do not offer to keep my daughter and myself as your permanent guests—that, I beg to say, is a proposal to which I certainly could not consent."

"Oh! as to terms, my dear Major," said the Double, with a slight laugh, "that is easily arranged. I shall simply ask you to pay me the same rent as you pay me here; and as for such sordid details as board, and so forth, I should, with your permission, leave that to be settled between Miss Escombe and my housekeeper."

Even Vane could not help feeling startled by the craft with which this proposal was put before the impecunious Major. The latter, forsooth! was to pay the same rent for this new accommodation that he did *not* pay now; while as for the rest of the terms, there was as little chance of his discharging that obligation as the other. But the plan spared the proud man's sense of dignity. To promise to pay was always enough for him. Vane saw, to his grief, that the hook was so baited that it must be taken. Nor was he in error.

"I must say," replied the Major, "that your pro-

posal is a very fair one, and seems likely to suit our mutual convenience. That it would be agreeable to myself personally I need hardly say. I stand greatly in need of such comfort as you offer me, and I admit that the terms you mention are equitable. I certainly could not enter your house except upon conditions of absolute independence, and what you propose with regard to rent and so forth seems to me altogether reasonable. On the other hand, you will have, as you say, the advantage of our society, such as it is, so that from that point of view the obligation will be reciprocal."

"I am really very glad to hear you say this," cried the Double, evidently delighted at the success of his plan. "Miss Escombe has said nothing so far, but I hope it meets with her approval."

Mildred blushed and looked confused. She glanced from the Double to her father, and again at him. Then she said in a low voice,—

"If papa agrees to your very kind offer, Mr Vane, you may be sure it will please me."

"Then I may consider the matter settled, may I not?" asked the Double.

"Yes, yes, I think so," replied the Major, "my daughter and I will, of course, talk it over; but I may say—yes, I think—on the whole we are likely to give it our consent."

"Well, then, we will leave it in that way," said the Double, "and you can let me know, when quite convenient, what you finally decide."

Vane could perceive that this conversation had greatly excited the Major, and that the selfish man had a hard task to repress all signs of the gratification it afforded him. He now, however, exhibited symptoms of fatigue, whether genuine or assumed, and in fact declared that the exertion of talking and listening had "quite exhausted" him.

"Then," said the Double, "I will wish you goodbye for the present."

He shook hands with the Major, and was proceeding to the door, when he paused as though a sudden thought had occurred to him.

"By the way—" he began.

"What is it now?" cried the Major, somewhat pettishly, as he seemed composing himself for a nap.

"I beg your pardon," continued the Double, "it is a mere detail—only a trifling suggestion that I would like to make. Before you and Miss Escombe come to any decision on this matter, don't you think it would be as well for you to see the house?"

"See the house!" echoed the Major impatiently, "how on earth can I see the house? I can't move from here at present. You must know that."

"Oh, yes, of course," said the Double; "I did not expect that you could come yourself, Major. But I thought that perhaps Miss Escombe might not object to call there, and go over the place, if only to select the rooms you are to occupy, and be able to describe the sort of accommodation I have to offer you."

Mildred received this suggestion with a look of surprise. It startled, yet it evidently did not displease her. As for the Major, he exclaimed in a tone that plainly implied his desire to get rid of his visitor and be left in peace,—

"Yes—yes—certainly. Settle that matter with Mildred in any way you please. Of course she can go and see the place first. Yes, perhaps, that would be better. Good-day."

Then the Major turned on his side, and closed his eyes.

The Double thereupon cast a meaning glance at Mildred, as though to invite her to leave the room with him, and she took the hint with alacrity.

They did not speak till they had reached the lower floor.

"Well," asked the Double, in a careless tone, "what do you really think of the new arrangement?"

"Oh!" replied Mildred, "I hardly know what to

say about it. It is so strange, so novel, so— Forgive me if I think most of your kindness and consideration in proposing it. But, of course, it will be very nice for papa, and I hope—oh! I do hope that his circumstances will improve soon, and enable him to pay you all he owes you—at least what he owes you in money, as for the rest, that, I fear, is impossible."

"Come, now," said the Double, "you must not talk like that, Miss Escombe. If you do, I shall feel hurt, I will not say offended. These little matters of business must not be mentioned, at any rate between you and me, and the rest I hope will be taken for granted. But there," he added in a lighter strain, "so long as I feel that you are not horrified at the thought of entering my dreadful den, I care for nothing else. You shall be mistress of the house, and have all the servants under your orders; and, in point of fact, I wish the whole place to be regarded as your papa's, and myself as a sort of lodger."

"But what you said about—" faltered Mildred timidly.

"About your coming up to have a look at the place. That is only an idea which just occurred to me. Of course if you don't like it, why—"

"Oh, no! Mr Vane, but—"

"But what? You are not afraid, are you, that I shall be so rude as to ask you, a young lady, to come and see me in my bachelor quarters? Why, of course, I shall not be at home when you call—we will make a special arrangement for that purpose."

"Oh, Mr Vane," cried Mildred, "surely you don't think I want to drive you out of your own house, after you have been so kind. I shall be very pleased to come whenever you like. I should not take half so much interest in your beautiful place if you were not there to show it me."

As she said these words she looked into his face with pure, candid eyes, as a sister might gaze upon a brother's. Vane felt that he himself must have

winced and been conscience-smitten before that innocent glance. Whether the Double shared this feeling he could not tell.

"Then be it so," said his counterpart. "When will you come?"

Mildred reflected.

"It is difficult to leave papa," she remarked. "He is so fretful when I am away. Yet I know he will be eager to hear all about the house, and to talk about it."

"Why not come now?" suggested the Double, "I can soon drive you to Bayswater and back in my carriage."

"Oh, no!" cried Mildred, "not now. He may want me, for this is a bad time to leave him. A little later in the day would be better, say after he has had his tea, for then he usually goes to sleep for a long while."

"Very well, then," said the Double, "suppose we say six o'clock this evening? I will send my brougham for you at that hour, and then you can come, like the princess in the fairy tale, and survey your new dominions."

Mildred seemed to feel a little hesitation in closing with this proposal, but at last she said,—

"Yes, I will come—at six o'clock."

CHAPTER XVIII.

RELEASE.

STILL did his evil other self leave Albert Vane ignored and silenced. Absorbed in his own dark thoughts, the Double drove away from the house of the Escombe's utterly regardless of his companion's presence. Sitting back in his luxurious carriage, his arms folded, his brows knit, his lips compressed, that dreadful being seemed unconscious of all things save the object of his reflections. What could be passing in his mind?

Was it remorse, doubt, a divided purpose, or was he nerving himself to carry out his base design? Vane was wholly at a loss to divine the nature of his cogitations, but he feared the worst.

And for himself the position was terrible. It was torture more agonising than all the pains of hell thus to be rendered speechless, powerless in face of the danger which seemed to threaten her he loved. Then came the thought—the appalling thought—did his fiendish tormentor design to doom him to a life-long extinction? Did he intend to execute his infamous plans without allowing the man whose place he had usurped a chance of arresting his progress?

"He told me," thought the wretched Vane, "that I have the power to destroy him, and myself. Did he tell me this to mock me in my hour of agony and despair, if at any future time I might desire to use that power? It must be so, and now he must be gloating over his own demoniacal craft. And I—I have no power to end my own existence except through him. Would that it were otherwise! Would that I had the choice of quitting this miserable world before the crime he seems to contemplate can be accomplished! What can be his purpose? Surely he will not force me to remain a mute and passive spectator of his wickedness! Surely he will not drag me after him through a life of hideous guilt! If he be consistent to my past, he could not do that. Bad as I was, viler still as I was growing, I could never have reached such a depth of villany. Yet he has gone farther in the path of infamy than ever I had thought of. What if my worst fears be realised? Shall I go mad? Can I go mad? Is it possible for this wretched brain of mine to continue distraught and raving all the while he lives? Oh, that it could be so! Oh, that I might at least be lost to reason and to sense, and thus be spared this crowning horror of my unhappy life!"

They were alone together at last in Vane's own

house, if such it could be called, he and his counterpart. Absolute silence still prevailed between them; but the Double seemed strangely agitated. He was excited and restless, sitting for a while in his armchair, then rising to pace the room, now pausing to reflect, then resuming his seat. His whole demeanour betokened uneasiness and vacillation, and Vane watched his every movement and expression. He was communing with himself, but yet he did not speak one word aloud.

Presently he placed his hand upon the bell to summon Vincent, and the valet appeared.

"Vincent," he said, with an effort to preserve his usual calm, indifferent tone, "order the carriage to be ready at five o'clock. Tell Humphreys to drive to Major Escombe's. Miss Escombe will return with him."

The valet received this instruction with no sign of surprise, strange though it must have seemed to him. Then he left the room.

Once more alone, the Double resumed his cogitations, and Vane could perceive that he was distracted by anxiety and doubt. What could be the nature of his plans? The fact that he appeared still undecided gave Vane a gleam of hope; but yet he feared. And this awful silence was worse to him than death itself. How long would it last, if indeed it were to end at all?

Presently the Double left the room, and Vane, as usual, was forced to follow. His counterpart slowly ascended the staircase till he reached that fatal chamber, Vane's private study, where stood that magic mirror, the acquisition of which had been fraught with such terrible consequences. Taking up a position before the shining glass, he surveyed his comely person, as Vane had gazed upon his own ere the reflection of his image had become himself.

Then at length the Double spoke aloud.

"Yes, here I see myself once more, my very—very

self. Well, it is a pleasant sight. It shows nothing that the world cannot see—nothing but a handsome, well-dressed, amiable man, conscious of good fortune, and wishing well to all his fellow-creatures. It is myself only that I see, as others see me—nothing else. That miserable shade of myself, which haunts me night and day, is invisible, unseen to me as to all mankind. Why should I let it trouble me? I have it in my power—wholly at my will—to summon it into my presence, or to shut it out for a time, or for ever, as I please. I am conscious that it is near me, but I need not hold communion with it, and I will not. Why should I? Why should I annoy myself by facing it, and listening to its reproaches? I am about to do that for which I know it would condemn me. I am resolved to make my darling irrevocably mine, and I want no monitor to preach away my will. Ah! fair mirror, you are a more congenial companion than that *other*. You tell me nothing that I would not wish to hear; you reflect only my body, not my mind or my soul. You are my friend—*it* is my foe. You see me as I shall be seen by her—not as I am, but as I seem. And so I would have her see me. Yet what would she think, what would she say, could she conceive the thoughts, the wishes, the resolves that are hidden in my breast? She would shrink from my touch as from pollution; she would fly from me in horror and disgust. Is it not so, oh! haunting ghost—thou shadow of my soul, my tormenting other self?"

"It is," cried Vane.

Impelled to give an answer to the Double's question, Vane little thought that his words would be heard. But they were. The Double, with a start, turned from the mirror, and faced him whom he had once more involuntarily recalled.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "then you will force yourself upon me."

"You addressed me," replied Vane.

"Unconsciously, perhaps, I did. Well, what have you to say?"

The Double's manner was cold and defiant. There was a stubborn resolution in it which Vane had never perceived before, and which made him shudder.

"What are you about to do?"

"What? To meet, to welcome, the girl I love. To show her the beauties of my house, which is hereafter to be her home."

"No more than that?"

"I do not know."

"You do. You are lying to me—to yourself."

"Well, I avow it. I have resolved to tell Mildred Escombe of my love. I am determined that she shall know at last that I intend to make her mine."

"As what? Your wife?"

"Folly! Why ask the question? Have you not answered it yourself, long ago? My mind is still unchanged."

"Have you reflected that what you contemplate is a crime?"

"Yes, I have reflected. Far too much. I have done with reflection. Now is the time for action."

"What is it that you contemplate?"

"I cannot tell. I leave it to chance—to the future. I only know I love fondly, passionately—with an ardour more intense than you had ever felt."

"And with this hot, unruly passion in your heart, do you design to utter words of love to a pure, innocent girl?"

"I do."

"Have you no thought, no pity for her?"

"Much. My declaration, I feel convinced, will fill her heart with joy."

"To break it in the end."

"Pshaw! That is an idle dream. Hearts are not so easily broken. My purpose is her happiness, and my own."

Your gratification—her misery and ruin."

"Cease this preaching. My mind is made up. No power on earth can move me from my resolve."

"Stay one moment yet. Your words are base and cruel; your pursuit of this poor girl a crime. O God! is it possible that I could ever have reached such a depth of infamy as you confess?"

"Quite possible. In the sort of sublimated condition in which you find yourself now, you can hardly realise my feelings, which, believe me or not as you please, would have been yours by this time. I stand at a certain disadvantage with you. You are all mind and soul; while I have the senses, the passions of a man. You cannot understand what you would have been had not your corporeal being been transferred to me."

"I cannot resist your fatal logic. I know, I feel, that you are but speaking in my person, as I might, aye, must have been. But, oh! cannot I appeal to you in another character? You are man, yet still spirit; you are myself, but yet another. Surely your soul, whatever it may be, is not that of a fiend, a demon; surely it is only tainted by contact with my vile body. To that let me appeal."

"Well, say on. You do not know what I am or whence I come; but let me hear you."

"Then listen to my prayer, and grant it. Spare this girl the shame you plan for her. Love her if you will, avow your love to her if you must, but sue to her as a man, and not a villain. Offer her your heart, your affection, your devotion; ask her to be yours, your own for life, but under the laws that honourable men obey."

"In other words, you ask me to take her as my wife?"

"I do."

"And do you give no thought to your own position? Do you not picture to yourself your pleasant state as you contemplate, unseen, unheard—your existence obliterated, while your consciousness remains — my wedded happiness and hers? To hover about us day

by day, to watch our endearments and our happy life, and torture yourself with the thought that all this bliss might have been your own?"

"I give no thought to myself, only to her. Yes, as you say, the spectacle of such a life would torture me indeed. But I would rather endure that than see her brought to shame."

"You are wonderfully disinterested."

"Call it by whatever mocking name you please. My mind, my soul is changed. My sordid love of self is gone. Her fate to me is ten thousand times more precious than my own. To her I would sacrifice my body, even my very soul itself."

The Double was silent for a few moments, and stood reflecting, with eyes bent upon the ground. Then looking up he said,—

"Who would have believed that this was Albert Vane?"

"It is not Albert Vane," replied that unhappy man. "Albert Vane, as he was, no longer exists. Could I but recover that corporeal form of which you have robbed me, I should be another man."

"Very possibly; but it is too late now. I possess your body, and must do justice to your lost character. Besides, apart from that, and speaking as a spirit, I have a mission to fulfil."

"To punish me?"

"You may put it so."

"But why punish her? She has done no wrong."

"It is inevitable. In this world of yours, the evil that the guilty do often falls upon the innocent. Surely you must be aware that that is a commonplace of life."

"Yet even the guilty may stay their hand, and spare the innocent."

"Yes, if they have the power to do so."

"And have I not the power—is it too late for that?"

"What do you mean?"

"The spell may be lifted. Reuben Max has said so."

"Well?"

"Will you not, in pity, disclose to me this secret?"

"No; that you must discover for yourself."

"How can I discover it?"

"I cannot say."

"You mean you will not?"

"As you please."

"Then I have but one resource."

"And that is—?"

"You told me long ago that I could destroy you."

"I did."

"Was that the truth?"

"It was."

"Could I, then, so far recover my physical faculties as to slay you on the spot?"

"You could."

"And would you not resist such an attempt—would you not paralyse my arm, or efface my presence?"

"I would not."

"That is very strange."

"Not at all. I have already told you that it is immaterial to me whether I live or die."

"And yet you desire to live as the lover of Mildred Escombe."

"I am speaking now as a spirit. I thought you were addressing me in that capacity."

"You are not mocking me?"

"No, I am quite in earnest—are you?"

"Can you ask the question? Can you doubt that if I have the power to prevent you from committing crime that I will use it?"

"But still a crime would be committed—in killing me you would be doing murder—self-murder, suicide."

"I care not for that. I will take my chance of pardon, or of punishment for the deed."

"For her sake?"

"For her sake."

"Well, as you please. You have the means at hand."

The Double pointed to the trophy of arms that hung upon the wall—rare weapons of all times and fashions. Among these were several keen and polished daggers.

To test his power, Vane placed his hand on one of these poniards, and took it down.

No sign of fear was shown by his other self. The Double stood before him, calm and steady, with a mocking smile on his lips, more like the sneer of a fiend than that of any mortal. Indeed his aspect seemed to have changed, and Vane for the first time could hardly recognise his former self in the person of this fair, sardonic demon.

"Well," cried the Double, "you have the weapon in your hand. Do you fear to use it?"

"I do not fear," Vane answered; "I only doubt my power."

"Try it, then."

"Oh! man, fiend, whatever you may be, is it too late to arrest your evil course?"

"It will be soon. See the hour approaches when Mildred Escombe will be here. The clock is on the stroke of six, the time appointed."

"And then?"

"Then—much may happen. But for one thing, you will be effaced—for ever."

"That shall not be. I will not live to be the silent witness of your crimes."

"Strike, then, in time."

The Double stood with arms outstretched, as though awaiting the expected blow. Vane raised the dagger in the air; but yet he paused.

"Could I not leave behind some record of my act? Could I not be allowed to tell the world—and her—why I did this deed?"

"If you please."

"Then I will write."

Vane approached his escritoire, but the Double stopped him.

"Stay," he said. "You have not the power to do this. Leave it to me. Dictate, and I will write."

"It matters little," said Vane. "Let it be as you will."

Then, as the Double, seated at the desk, took up the pen, Vane spoke as follows:—

"I, Albert Vane, desire to make it known that I have perished by my own hand. I sacrifice my life to save another from a fate more terrible than death. Under what circumstances I take this fatal step can never be revealed. It is a secret that I carry with me to the grave. There are mysteries in men's lives that none can fathom, and mine is one beyond all human belief or comprehension. Enough, that in a position of sore perplexity, in view of an impending calamity, that no other method can avert, I seek the solution of my troubles in death. The world that knew me never saw me as I was, or as I am, for who can tell what is hidden in men's inmost hearts? But let none judge me harshly. I have done wrong—great wrong—but I have made atonement. To one, inexpressibly dear to me—to Mildred Escombe—I leave my heart's best love. I die for her, although she never will know why. Let her remember me as one who loved her more than life, and whose last thought was of her, and of her welfare. ALBERT VANE."

The paper bearing these strange words was left upon the desk, and then the Double rose.

He stood face to face before Albert Vane once more, with arms outstretched, and with that mocking smile again upon his lips.

"Well," he said, "I am ready. Are not you?"

Vane still held the dagger in his hand, but hesitated yet to raise it.

"Is there no other way than this?" he pleaded. "Cannot I avert your criminal designs except by suicide?"

"What!" sneered the Double, "are you a coward at the last?"

"No, I fear nothing for myself. My life is worthless to me, but it is not my own to take. Have you no power to slay me? Can you not spare me this act of guilt?"

"Enough!" exclaimed the Double impatiently. "The time has come—decide. One moment more, and it will be too late. Your opportunity will be gone. Your presence will be effaced for ever, and Mildred will be mine."

"Then die, and let me die!" cried Vane.

For a moment the dagger flashed in the air, its bright blade gleaming in the fading light. The next it would have fallen, buried in the Double's heart.

But that strange, unearthly being stepped back a pace, exclaiming,—

"Stay!"

Vane paused, motionless as though turned to stone, and filled with wonder. For a sudden change had come over the aspect of his counterpart. Still did he recognise himself in that simulated form; yet it was not himself as he had seen it lately. No calm, complacent being stood before him; nor yet the mocking demon that he had since beheld, but a man gentle of mien, with a grave yet tender expression in his countenance, gazing upon him with loving, pitying eyes.

"Stay!" repeated the Double, "the end has come; but not the end you sought. My task is over, my mission is fulfilled. The magic mirror has achieved its work, and now the time is ripe to tell its final secret. Know that I, its instrument, have power to bless as well as to curse; to save as well as to destroy.

You heard the legend of its early use, but you did not hear all. That man who first possessed it loved, and ruined her he loved, and then she fled from him. He was transformed like you, and the being who took his shape pursued the victim of his guilty passion even as he himself designed to do. Cannot you guess the rest? It was not to save her that he took his life, but to spare himself a dreadful future. You would have perished in hope; he perished in despair. He did not know the secret of the mirror, but you have learnt it. By some great sacrifice of self, the spell may be removed. Such sacrifice you were prepared to make, and you are free. I have no power to haunt you further. You are no more yourself, but another. In these last moments of our intercourse, my shape alone was yours, my soul my own. Take back your body, you have earned the trust. Live your new life, and hope for love and happiness. My work is ended. Henceforth I trouble you no more. Farewell!"

Then stepping backward, the Double, still with kindly, pitying eyes fixed upon Vane, slowly approached the mirror, and now his image mingled with the surface like a painted portrait as when he first appeared.

Vane darted forward. His likeness was reflected as before, but as he advanced it receded. There was a moment during which his eyes seemed dazed; the mirror was a blank reflecting nothing, presenting only a strange vague chaos of mist or cloud.

Then Vane sank upon the ground before the glass, with arms extended as in supplication. And there—there—in the polished mirror, a figure like his own knelt plain before him, with arms extended too. At last—at last—himself—his very—very self!

He rose; the figure rose. He stretched his hands towards it as though he would embrace it, and it gave back his action.

"Oh, God be thanked!" he cried, "I am spared, saved; restored to life, and love, and happiness. I am myself once more, in body as in soul. Thank God for that—thank God!"

He turned and glanced at where the paper had been left which told the story of his expected fate.

The sheet lay there, its surface a blank. The words had vanished with the hand that traced them.

Then there fell upon his ear a sound that made his heart beat wildly.

It was the faint tinkle of a distant bell.

CHAPTER XIX.

A NEW LIFE.

VANE flew to the door, to the head of the staircase, and listened. There he heard a low, sweet voice inquiring,—

"Is Mr Vane at home?"

It was she—she whom he had thought to have lost for ever, to have sacrificed to the evil passion of his baser other self. And now she had come, at the appointed hour, to meet, not that other, but him, in his own recovered form. Oh! the joy of knowing that that form was his once more; to feel the warm blood coursing through his veins, his pulses beating, his heart throbbing; to experience all the delicious sensations of material, mortal existence! He was no longer a shadow, but a man, and as a man he was about to greet the girl he loved.

He paused a while to recover his composure. He felt that he must check the exuberance of his great joy. She must not see any change in his demeanour. It would astonish, perhaps alarm her. She did not know, had never known, him as he was, and, for the

present at least, he must appear to her the same as ever. The revelation of his new, true self would come in time.

So he descended the stairs with his usual quiet, leisurely step, and entered the room into which Miss Escombe had been ushered.

She was seated by chance in his own favourite arm-chair, her scarf half thrown aside. There was always a natural grace in her attitudes, and, with a warm flush on her face, she never seemed to Vane so beautiful as now.

As he approached her she rose quickly and offered him her hand. She little knew with what exquisite delight he felt the gentle pressure of her fingers in his own. It was the sweetest assurance he had yet received of his new-found life.

"And this is your house!" she exclaimed. "How beautiful it is!"

"You like it, then?"

"Oh, it is lovely. Everything I see about me is a work of art and taste. And to think that you should have offered us such a home as this!"

"But you have only had a glimpse of it as yet. Come and I will show you all its splendours."

Putting aside the rich heavy curtains that separated the front apartment from that adjoining it, Vane led his fair visitor into the latter, which was fitted up in the same luxurious manner, with carved oak furniture and painted screens; the walls, hung with graceful draperies, which becomingly set off a few choice paintings, with here and there a plaque or bit of blue china, while the window was filled in with a noble piece of ancient stained glass.

"Why, this room," cried Mildred, "is even more lovely than the other. It looks as though it had been arranged by some clever artist."

"I hope I am something of an artist, myself," replied Vane. "But there are other parts of the house that I think will please you still better."

Full as his mind was of more serious thoughts, he could not but feel amused and gratified at the almost childish pleasure which the sight of his art treasures afforded his companion. Nothing seemed to escape her notice, and every object that her eye encountered excited some exclamation of wonder and delight.

He made no attempt to check her enthusiasm; indeed, he encouraged it to the utmost. In the case of any other visitor, the marked manner in which he drew attention to the beauty of his own possessions might have seemed to savour of ostentation. He was seeking to evoke her admiration in a very different spirit.

And so he conducted her from room to room, inviting her opinion of its decorations and arrangements, rejoicing to see that every fresh display increased her pleasure and surprise.

Now he brought her to the upper floor and introduced her to the suite of rooms containing that precious set of Chippendale furniture which he had purchased of George Gilchrist.

"What curious, old-fashioned things!" exclaimed Miss Escombe. "They are like what one sees in old country houses."

"Do you not admire them?" asked Vane.

"Oh, yes, they are very quaint and interesting," she replied; "but I don't think they are quite so pretty as those downstairs."

"Then I will change them," said Vane, "for it is this set of rooms that I propose to offer to your father and yourself."

"Oh!" cried Mildred, "then I am sorry I said what I did. Believe me, I think they are charming. Quite good enough—only too good—for us. Don't, dear Mr Vane, pray don't alter your arrangements to suit my silly want of taste. I should feel quite pained if you did."

She spoke so earnestly, and looked so charming in her considerate anxiety, that Vane felt as though he

could have taken her in his arms there and then, and vowed to gratify her slightest wish; but he restrained himself.

"I only want," he said, "to make you both as comfortable as I can. Yes, these rooms, if you like, shall be devoted entirely to your use. There are others that my housekeeper shall show you at a future time; but there is just one more that I wish you to see now. I call it my study, but, if it pleases you, I propose that it shall be hereafter your boudoir."

"Oh! Mr Vane," exclaimed Mildred, "I could not bear to turn you out of your own study. That would really be too bad. As though all these lovely rooms were not enough for us."

"But," replied Vane, with a smile, "I insist upon it. I have special reasons for wishing you to occupy this room. Come, now, and see it."

It was with a beating heart that Vane led the way into that memorable apartment—the last to which he intended to introduce his visitor—that study, which had been the scene of such eventful moments in his life.

He opened the door and Mildred entered. Instantly one object in it caught her eye and absorbed her attention.

"Why," she cried, "that must be the magic mirror! Oh! I am almost afraid to look at it—to go near it."

She put her hand instinctively on Vane's arm, and her gentle touch sent a thrill through his frame.

"Nay," he said, "there is no harm in it. It cannot hurt one like you, even if it has the power to affect the lives of others."

"Well," said Mildred looking up into his face with an arch smile, "it has not done *you* any harm, has it?"

Vane did not answer immediately, and Mildred was too much engaged in examining the wondrous glass to notice his silence.

"No," he replied at last, drawing a deep breath, "no, it has done me no harm."

There they stood, side by side, gazing into the magic mirror. The glass faithfully reflected their forms, and seemed to inspire them with a common thought. And that thought expressed itself by different signs. For Mildred blushed, and Vane turned pale as death.

Still looking into the mirror, she noticed the change in his countenance, and directed towards him a frightened glance.

"Oh!" she cried, "what is it disturbs you? Tell me, pray tell me, is there really something in this mysterious mirror that threatens you with danger?"

"No," exclaimed Vane, in an excited tone, "there is nothing in that glass but what I am glad to see. If you could but know the joy I feel in beholding our two forms reflected there side by side, to see myself near you, to think that I shall soon be near you day by day, dwelling with you under the same roof, enjoying the delight of your society, and rejoicing that I have in some measure contributed to your happiness and comfort, then would you understand how sweet a sight this mirror offers me."

Mildred gazed at him while he was uttering these words with a look of wonder. Then she turned pale—paler than Vane himself—and it was plain that she was trembling in every limb. She tried to speak, but seemed tongue-tied, and stood awaiting, in strange embarrassment, her companion's next words.

"Miss Escombe," he continued, "I have offered you a shelter in my house—you and your father—but I offer you more. I wish to bestow upon you all I possess in the world, and with it my heart's best and fondest love."

"Oh, Mr Vane," cried Mildred, stepping back from him, "I never expected this. Surely you cannot mean that—that—"

"I love you. Yes. You did not think this, but it is true. I have loved you, Mildred, long and dearly, not indeed as I love you now. Why I have never

before declared my affection I cannot tell you. But this is no sudden impulse; the passion that I feel for you has grown upon me day by day, stronger, and deeper, and purer as I knew you better—and myself."

"But, Mr Vane," pleaded Mildred, "I only regarded you as a friend, a kind good friend, a sort of brother."

"Granted," said Vane; "but will you let me be no more to you than that? Mildred—dear, sweet Mildred—is it only my vanity, and not a deeper instinct which has told me that you have thought of me with something more than friendship?"

Mildred dropped her eyes and did not speak. There is a silence more eloquent than words, and none that says so much as when a woman, asked if she loves, returns no answer.

It was at least enough for Vane. He took his darling in his arms, and pressed her to his heart.

"Yes—yes—I know you love me—dearest, sweetest Mildred, be my own—my wife."

. . . . . .

And as Albert Vane's wife Mildred next entered Albert Vane's house. Her father came thither also, but not to stay. Six months after his daughter's marriage he did the first considerate act of his life—he died. Good living, bad for him, was his destruction. In vain did his son-in-law and daughter attempt to restrain his appetite, and his old enemy the gout, attacking a vital part, made an end of him at last.

Albert Vane lost no time in beginning his new life. He provided handsomely for all his poor relations; pensioned his old servant Baldwin; made George Gilchrist a free gift of those precious Chippendales, and purchased the unsightly slum at the rear of his premises, and so altered its aspect as to render its poor inhabitants comfortable and happy. Nor did Mr Followay remind him of his promise in vain. He subscribed liberally, not only to the Destitute Washerwomen, but to every other deserving charity brought to his notice, placing

only one condition on his bounty, that his donations should be strictly anonymous.

It was not long before the fame of his generosity spread abroad. There were acts of liberality which he could not well conceal, and these rendered him more popular than ever among those acquaintances of his who had always regarded him as a "good fellow." He had never before shown such substantial signs of his good nature, it was true, but this development of his kindly disposition was set down to the influence of his pretty and charming wife.

There was one, however, who appeared both astonished and puzzled at this sudden outbreak of generosity on his part.

"I cannot make him out," cried Reuben Max. "No, not at all. He come to me ven he got de mirror and he said he vas not changed. But now he is changed. He is not himself at all. Ach! dat is strange."

The dealer at last had an opportunity of testing his doubts, for shortly after his marriage Vane called to see his old friend.

"Well, Max," he said, "what do you think of me now?"

"Ach! Mr Vane," replied old Reuben, "I don't know vat to dink, not at all. But dell me, my dear; vas you de man for de mirror or vas you not?"

"Ah! well, Max," laughed Vane, "I really must leave you to guess. If I confessed that the mirror worked its spell on me, no one would believe it."

"But I vould believe it, Mr Vane," replied the dealer eagerly. "Yes, dat is so. And you have been under de spell. You vas not vat you seemed, and you are not vat you vas. But vat are you now? Are you yourself or somebody else?"

"Myself, of course," replained Vane. "Why, man, I discovered the secret, the last secret, of the mirror."

"You discovered him? How?"

"That you must not expect me to tell you. You know I could obtain release from the spell by making a great sacrifice—and I made one."

"A great sacrifice! And vat vas dat?"

"Why, I married!"

"Ach! yes," cried Max, as though this were quite sufficient explanation. "Yes, dat is so."

But the old man could never convince his friends and customers that he had really sold Albert Vane a magic mirror, and that it had been the means of transforming his life. They only laughed at him.

"Ach!" cried the dealer. "Dere is no faid in de vorld. No von believes noding—not at all."

Mildred in time came to hear the strange story, but, needless to say, she was as incredulous as the rest. Even Vane found it impossible to persuade her that there had been any change in his life.

"I always thought you the best and noblest of men," said Mildred, "and every day proves to me more clearly that I was right."

"No, love," replied Vane sadly, "there was a time when I was the most selfish of beings."

"I would not believe it," replied the fond wife, "even if an angel told me so."

"Then I suppose," Vane said, "it would be useless to conjure up the spirit of the magic mirror?"

"Ah! Albert dearest, you must not speak of that. It was a delusion, a dream. It could not be. It is impossible that any other being could have assumed your form. Why, I must have detected the imposture in a moment. No, as you are you were—as you were you are—and always will be in my eyes, in my heart of hearts."

Such is the faith of women in those they love!

THE END.

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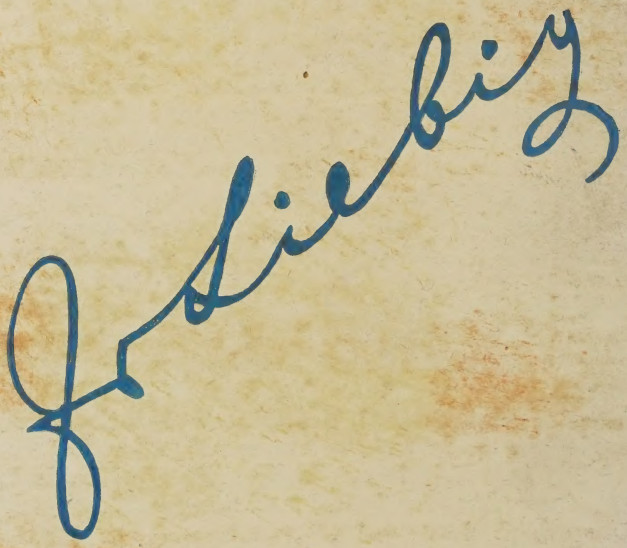

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